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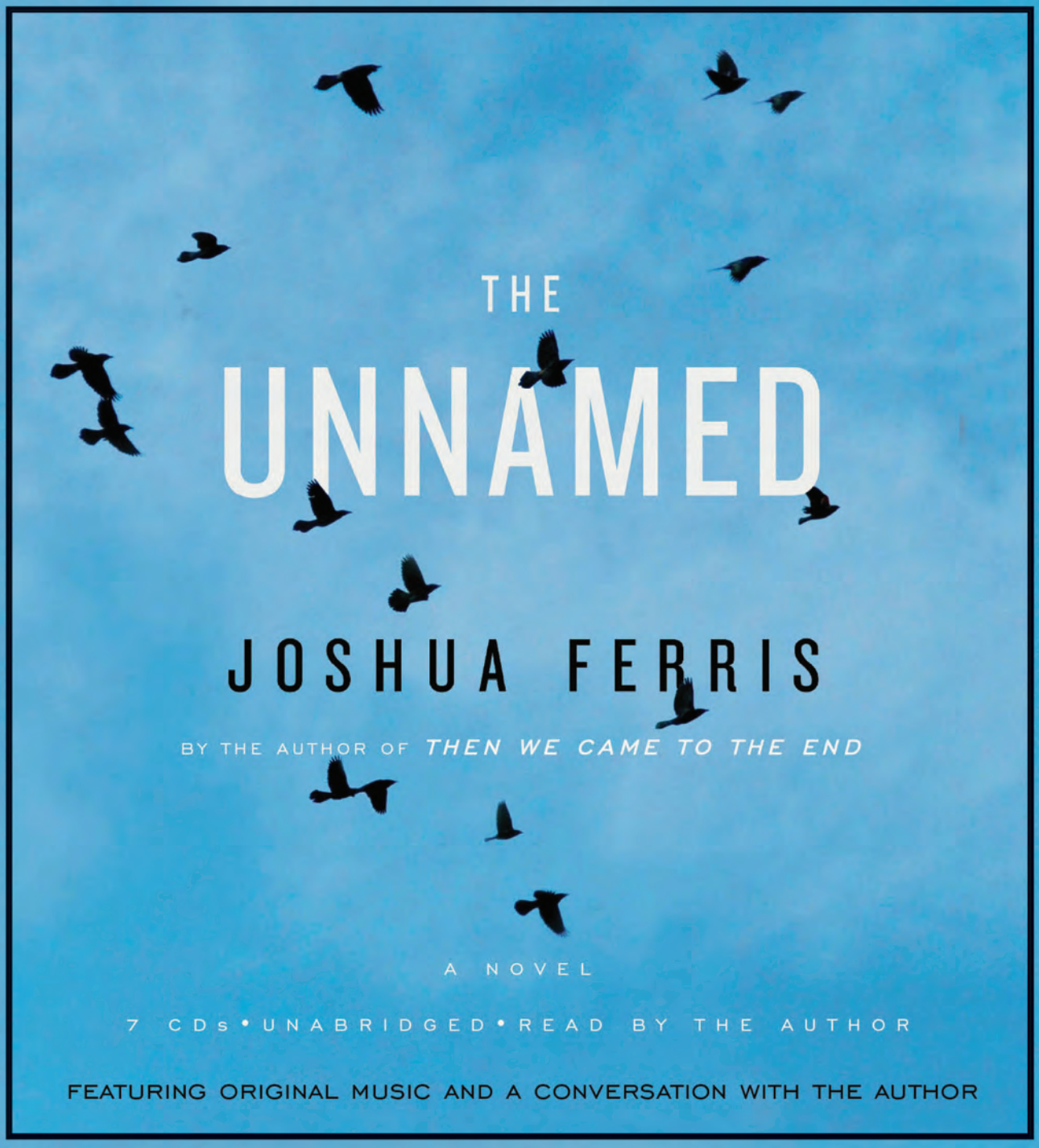
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EDITORIAL

BY JOSH JACKSON

R.I.P. INDIE

It might seem strange for *Paste* to proclaim the death of "indie." Our magazine's rise to modest renown has been on the backs of everything that might be considered part of that realm. Our publishing operation has been as independent as it gets, launched outside of the entertainment and music industries by three guys in a one-room office in Decatur, Ga. Much of the music and film we cover is stamped with the "indie" label, and we've highlighted video-game and fashion designers working outside of mainstream channels.

But the moniker has always bugged us, partly because we've never been sure exactly what it meant. We've always cared more about the quality of the art than the way it's marketed—there are amazing stadium-sized bands on major labels, and there are amazing bands putting out their own records and opening for equally obscure headliners in dingy clubs. We've always seen it as our job to celebrate both, to make the magazine a meritocracy. And we've never begrudged the upstart artists who find a broader audience—or marketing partners.

As a genre descriptor, indie has been used to identify everything from folksy singer/songwriters to synth-based dance pop—we're guilty of using it loosely even within our own pages. But with indie acts showing up in TV shows, commercials, movies, radio, sales charts, magazine covers and arenas, the word has lost whatever meaning anyone might have attributed to it.

So we asked *Paste* assistant editor Rachael Maddux to answer the question, "Is Indie Dead?" The answer was an emphatic, 8,000-word "yes" (pg. 39). Indie is dead, in part, because indie has won. The pop pabulum it was fighting against still exists, but it's no longer the only species in the mainstream. The playing field has been leveled; well-crafted, authentic music and film no longer need to be defined by what they're not. While the music that grew out of truly independent movements lives on, we'll continue to celebrate it for how it makes us feel and think and dance, not how indie it is. And we'll continue to look beyond indie rock to the best music, regardless of genre. We'll continue to search for signs of life in movies, books, TV and video games, regardless of their origins. We'll do it independently, of course, but we don't think that's enough of a handicap anymore to remain a badge of honor.

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INBOX

A BEST OF THE DECADE CHRISTMAS

Thank you for your Best of the Decade issue. You filled my Netflix queue and made it extremely easy for me to let friends and family know what to get me for Christmas. I simply forwarded them the best books of the decade list. This is sure to be the best Christmas ever.

ELEANOR DILL { Atlanta, Ga. }

ANDY WHITMAN ON MUSIC

Andy Whitman, thanks for telling it like it is. There is a freshness and honesty to your *Paste* blog that keeps me coming back. That isn't to say your best-of list looks like mine. I do love Dylan, Peter Case, Buddy Miller and the like, and I plan on picking up Joe Henry, Dave Perkins and Darcy James Argue based on your recommendation and listening at Amazon; I've never gotten around to The Decemberists, however, and am nearly ignorant when it comes to some of the younger bands. There is so much heart in what you write, and it's concise. I just read one of your older pieces on Larry Norman. It is right on target. It said everything I've always wanted to say about Larry. I just don't have the vocabulary to put it in place the way you do. Bravo.

GARY KERSEY { Indian Trail, N.C. }

FEEDING LIONS TO THE CHRISTIANS?

I know that Ms Lamott loves to blur and rethink our ideas about religion and spirituality. But why does she want to further the idea that the "church" and its members have no compassion for animals? I was very distracted by her reference to her "priest friend." The very idea that because Jesus ate Passover lamb we should stuff our faces with cheap Ikea meatballs is appalling. Passover lamb is sacred. And many of Jesus' parables use animals to illustrate compassion, guidance and love. If you call yourself a Christian, please remember that we are to take care of this earth, and treat its creatures with care. Even if we do end up eating them for supper.

JESS BARCELONA { Santa Barbara, Calif. }

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PASTE GOES TO 11?

Isn't 76 out of 100 the same as 7.6 out of 10? Unless Paste goes to 11, that is!

GREG LEA { Denver }

THE FATHER OF FUSION

Mark Kemp was right on point with the Miles Davis historical facts about the recent release of *The Complete Columbia Album Collection.* But one important detail he failed to mention was the fact that before techno DJs explored Miles' fusion period, it helped launch a new musical movement that reached its zenith in the mid '70s. The fusion-jazz era was spearheaded by the members of various Miles Davis groups, with projects like Return To Forever, Weather Report, The Tony Williams Lifetime, John McLaughlin's Mahavishnu Orchestra and Herbie Hancock's *Head Hunters*. An entire genre bloomed from Davis' critical and commercial risk-taking.

DARION LYNN { Richmond, Va }

ERRATA

On the Dec./Jan. Sampler CD, Oberhofer was misspelled, and on the Sampler page in the magazine Oberhofer's track "AWY FRM U" was also misspelled.

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ONLINE

Reviews of new movies *I Love You Phillip Morris, Shutter Island* and *Alice In Wonderland.* **Interviews** with Hot Chip, Frightened Rabbit (above), Cold War Kids and more.

Add your own user rating to anything reviewed in this issue!

Photos by Sarah Linebaugh and Morgan Cogswell

Live performances from (clockwise from top) Erin McKeown, Jill Andrews, Nicole Atkins and Joshua James.

ONLINE Throughout the magazine, this symbol denotes additional content online. Visit **PasteMagazine.com/February10.**

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NEW MUSIC SAMPLER

1. APRIL SMITH AND THE GREAT PICTURE SHOW "Colors" (A. Smith) from *Songs for a Sinking Ship.* ℗2010 Little Roscoe (BMI). **Hometown:** Brooklyn, N.Y. **Website:** aprilsmithmusic.com **(PG. 26)**

2. ATHLETE "The Getaway (radio mix)" (Athlete) from *Black Swan* ℗2009 Polydor Ltd (UK). Courtesy of Original Signal Recordings. **Hometown:** London **Website:** athlete.mu **(PG. 57)**

3. PHANTOGRAM "When I'm Small" (J. Carter / S. Barthel) from *Eyelid Movies* ℗2010 Charlie Everywhere Music (SESAC) / Demarest Barthel (SESAC). Courtesy of Barsuk Records. **Hometown:** Saratoga Springs, N.Y. **Website:** phantogram.net

4. PATTY GRIFFIN "Move Up" from *Downtown Church* (traditional, public domain). **Hometown:** Austin, Texas **Website:** pattygriffin.com **(PG. 57)**

5. RETRIBUTION GOSPEL CHOIR "Hide It Away" (A. Sparhawk) from *2* ℗2010 1238 Music (BMI). Courtesy of Sub Pop Records. **Hometown:** Duluth, Minn. **Website:** subpop.com/artists/retribution_gospel_choir

6. LIGHTSPEED CHAMPION "Marlene" (D. Hynes) from *Life Is Sweet! Nice to Meet You* ℗2010 Domino Publishing Company USA (ASCAP). Courtesy of Domino Recording Co. **Hometown:** London **Website:** lightspeedchampion.com **(PG. 65)**

7. BLUNT MECHANIC "Our First Brains" (B. Barnett) from *World Record* ℗2010 A Quiet Place To Sleep (BMI). Courtesy of Barsuk Records. **Hometown:** Seattle **Website:** myspace.com/bluntmechanic

8. YEASAYER "Ambling Alp" (Keating / Wilder / Tuton) from *Odd Blood* ℗2009 Secretly Canadian, Inc. / Diamond Eagle (ASCAP) / Wada Pav (ASCAP) / Goldovsky Publishing (ASCAP). Courtesy of Secretly Canadian, Inc. **Hometown:** Brooklyn, N.Y. **Website:** secretlycanadian.com **(PG. 62)**

9. FREELANCE WHALES "Generator 2nd Floor" (J. Dadone) from *Weathervanes* ℗2010 Heirs and Heiresses (BMI). Courtesy of Frenchkiss Records / Mom +Pop. **Hometown:** New York **Website:** freelancewhales.com **(PG. 23)**

10. FOUR TET "Love Cry" (K. Hebden) from *There Is Love In You* ℗2010 Domino Recording Co. Ltd / Chrysalis Music Publishing. Courtesy of Domino Recording Co. LTD. **Hometown:** London **Website:** fourtet.net **(PG. 58)**

11. LIARS "Scissor" (Liars) from *Sisterworld* ℗2010 Mute Song. Courtesy of Mute Records. **Hometown:** Los Angeles **Website:** thesisterworld.com **(PG. 61)**

12. ALLISON MOORER "Crows" (A. Moorer) from *Crows* ℗2010 Allison Moorer/Peteybug Tunes (SESAC) Courtesy of Ryko. **Hometown:** New York **Website:** allisonmoorer.com **(PG. 54)**

13. THE ALBUM LEAF "There is a Wind" (J. LaValle / P. Jenkins) from *A Chorus of Storytellers* ℗2010 SONGS Music Publishing / The Album Leaf Music (ASCAP). Courtesy of Sub Pop. **Hometown:** San Diego **Website:** thealbumleaf.com

14. ÓLÖF ARNALDS "Klara" (Ó. Arnalds) from *Vid og Vid* ℗2007. Courtesy of One Little Indian. **Hometown:** Reykjavík, Iceland **Website:** myspace.com/olofarnalds **(PG. 56)**

15. THE WATSON TWINS "U N Me" (L. Watson) from *Talking To You, Talking To Me* ℗2010 Smiley Dean Publishing (BMI). Courtesy of Vanguard Records, A Welk Music Group. **Hometown:** Los Angeles **Website:** thewatsontwins.com **(PG. 57)**

16. MOONLIGHT BRIDE "Young Guns" (Moonlight Bride) from *Myths* ℗2009 Midnight Music Society (ASCAP). Courtesy of Moonlight Bride. **Hometown:** Chattanooga, Tenn. **Website:** moonlightbride.net **(PG. 25)**

17. JULIANA HATFIELD "Dear Anonymous" (J. Hatfield) from *Peace and Love* ℗2010 Juliana Hatfield Music (BMI). Courtesy of Ye Olde Records. **Hometown:** Cambridge, Mass. **Website:** julianahatfield.com **(PG. 64)**

18. BEACH HOUSE "Norway" (Beach House) from *Teen Dream* ℗2010 Apple Orchard. Courtesy of Sub Pop Records. **Hometown:** Baltimore **Website:** subpop.com/artists/beach_house **(PG. 59)**

19. OBLIO "A Story of Nashville" (T. Price) from *Tonight, You're Gonna Be A Revelation* ℗2009 Some Folks Are Communists (BMI) **Hometown:** Nashville **Website:** obliomusic.com

20. DAPHNE WILLIS "Bluff" (D. Willis) from *What To Say* ℗2010 Barefeet Records (ASCAP). Courtesy of Vanguard Records, a Welk Music Group Company. **Hometown:** Chicago **Website:** daphnewillis.com

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21. SEABIRD "Don't You Know You're Beautiful" (Seabird) from *Rocks Into Rivers* ℗2009 Meaux Hits (ASCAP) / Meaux Mercy (BMI) / Skyline Apartments Music (BMI) / 9t One Songs (ASCAP) / Ariose Music (ASCAP), admin. by EMI CMG Publishing. **Hometown:** Cincinnati, Ky. **Website:** seabirdmusic.com

22. OBERHOFER "o000o000o" (B. Oberhofer) from *o000o000o* ℗2009 Brad Oberhofer. Courtesy of Brad Oberhofer. **Hometown:** Tacoma, Wash. **Website:** myspace.com/oberhofer

23. SKYBOX "Trout" (T. Ellis) from *Morning After Cuts* ℗2010 Sink The Turtle Music (ASCAP). **Hometown:** Chicago **Website:** skyboxmusic.com

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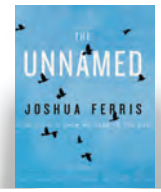
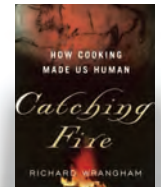


1. JOSHUA FERRIS

The Unnamed

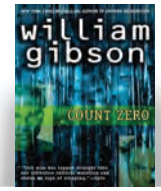
Reader: Joshua Ferris - An Excerpt from "The Feet, Mechanical" An Excerpt from THE UNNAMED, written and read by Joshua Ferris. © 2010 by Joshua Ferris, ℗ 2010 by Hachette Audio, Courtesy of Hachette Audio. **(PG. 76)**



2. RICHARD WRANGHAM

Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human

Narrated by Kevin Pariseau. An excerpt from *Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human* Published 2009 by Audible, Inc. Courtesy of Audible.com.



3. WILLIAM GIBSON

Count Zero

Narrated by Jonathan Davis. An excerpt from *Count Zero* Published 2009 by Audible Frontiers. Courtesy of Audible.com.

4. THOMAS LEVENSON

Newton and the Counterfeiter: The Unknown Detective Career of the World's Greatest Scientist. Narrated by Kevin Pariseau. An excerpt from *Newton and the Counterfeiter: The Unknown Detective Career of the World's Greatest Scientist.* Published 2009 by Audible, Inc. Courtesy of Audible.com.

5. JASON HOLT

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ANGÉLIQUE KIDJO MAKES THE RECORD OF HER LIFE

As a young girl growing up in the West African nation of Benin, Angélique Kidjo lived and breathed music, thanks in part to her father—a banjo player who brought music home from France—and her brothers, who started bands when she was just old enough to drive them crazy. When instruments arrived at her house, she reached for a drum, which she'd never seen before. "I got my hand spanked," she says, "and was told, 'Don't touch.' I went and touched it anyway, and no one could stop me."

As Kidjo grew up, she discovered music so captivating, so exciting, so inspiring, that hanging out with her friends on the streets of Cotonou seemed like a waste of time. Her father's records (everything from classical music to Nat King Cole) and Benin's eclectic radio station (which "pretty much played everything until the Communist regime arrived") didn't displace the traditional music she'd been fed since the womb—everything just blended together. That freedom to listen without prejudice shines through on Kidjo's new album, *Oyo*, which she says pays "tribute to the musicians—male and female—that really have carved my way of doing music and kept me out of trouble by keeping me singing."

Oyo is mostly a covers album, featuring Kidjo's takes on everything from traditional West African songs to Otis Redding and Aretha Franklin. It's a covers album like Werner Herzog's crazed *Bad Lieutenant* is a remake. Every song offers a revelation—whether it's Kidjo slipping out of English on Redding's "I've Got Dreams to Remember," or the mishmash of "Dil Main Chuppa Ke Pyar Ka," a nod to the Bollywood films of Kidjo's youth. Why, of all things, Bollywood? "That's what I could afford to see because that was the only thing available for us to see."

Kidjo, 49, says she reached a moment when she said to herself, "Let me go and dig back and let me reassure myself of what I was doing." But *Oyo*, the sound of a supremely confident singer at her most liberated, makes it clear she needs no reassurance. Over the years, Kidjo has lost none of the hunger that drove her brothers crazy. **MARK KROTOV**

KATE NASH: IN THE STUDIO

Kate Nash just finished her forthcoming second album—about three minutes ago. "The producers literally just left the studio. I thought I'd feel excited," she says from inside London's RAK Studios. "But I feel a bit terrified."

Nash is nervous because the pop-star train that sped her from 2007 to 2008, powered by her hit debut *Made of Bricks*, is about to start chugging again after a year of "life, really," she says. "Being a person. Getting a flat. Buying a bunny rabbit. Passing my driving test."

Though *Bricks*—with its charming kiss off "Foundations"—drew comparisons to Regina Spektor's enchanting lilt and Lily Allen's cutting English wit, Nash demonstrated her own knack for capturing idiosyncratic relationships in piano-pop tunes. One tune, for example, found her wondering, "Why you being a dickhead for?" over a muted soul groove. Another pondered being shat upon by birds flying overhead.

After more than a year of touring, though, Nash felt she'd lost touch with herself—her "anti-celebrity" persona had become a bit of a persona on its own. So she disappeared from the spotlight, and of her second album she says, "Fame didn't factor into my writing."

During her break, Nash started listening to '60s girl groups and riot grrrl punk, which both pushed her to pick up her pen. "Being a woman was important to me on this album, so I wanted to be inspired by women," she said. "I wanted to mix The Supremes and Bikini Kill."

The result isn't too far off. Lead single "Do-Wah Do" is a flailing rocker with a Motown beat and lyrics about boys blindly falling for a "shady" girl. The endlessly catchy "Kiss That Girl" is an aggressive Little Eva update where Nash feels insecure seeing her man next to a girl whose "feet don't even stink."

"Everyone's felt like that—you need that person to be dedicated to you and not look at anyone else," she says. "It's quite romantic." **JUSTIN JACOBS**

Photo by Claire Nash

"ELECTRIFYING!"

- Peter Travers, Rolling Stone

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HALL OF CHAMPIONS

ALL-STAR MUSICIANS TEAM WITH PRESERVATION HALL JAZZ BAND

The new album of surprising collaborations from Preservation Hall—New Orleans' venerable bastion of traditional jazz—started with Tom Waits and a sign from God, in that order.

In the early fall of 2005, the Preservation Hall Jazz Band shared a bill with Waits, among others, at a Hurricane Katrina benefit at Radio City Music Hall. During a lull backstage, Preservation Hall creative director Ben Jaffe and vocalist/reed man Clint Maedgen—both huge fans—noticed Waits alone, leaning against a wall.

"I had my tuba," Jaffe says. "I said, OK, Clint, let's go. This is never gonna happen again." They chatted with Waits. They played him a song. They got a phone number. "Since then, for years, at least once a week Clint and I would have our conversation about what we were gonna do with Tom," he says. Jaffe dug out an old song called "Tootie Ma Is A Big Fine Thing," which appeared as an extra track on a Baby Dodds Trio CD—the original 1940s vinyl was possibly the first commercial waxing of a Mardi Gras Indian street chant. That, they decided, would be the song they'd do someday with Waits. Jaffe sat on it until, one day, sifting through stacks of records at the Hall archive, the first album he pulled out was one of those rare original 78-RPM copies of "Tootie Ma." He mailed it to Waits along with a 78 player and a note asking him if he'd like to record it at the Hall. Months passed before he finally got an email back: When were they available to record?

"I took it as a sign from God that Tom Waits was going to record 'Tootie Ma Is A Big Fine Thing' with the Preservation Hall Jazz Band," Jaffe says. "I thought, 'This is the only thing that could possibly convince him—to give him the only copy I've ever seen in my life.'"

"Tootie Ma" is a standout on *Preservation*, the band's new album, which also includes collaborations between the Hall band and a diverse assortment of artists including Andrew Bird, Brandi Carlile, Richie Havens, Pete Seeger, Del McCoury and Jim James of My Morning Jacket. Every track was recorded live at the Hall, and almost all the songs are traditional and public domain, done in the classic Hall style—acoustic hot jazz with banjo, clarinet and brass—that has remained New Orleans' hallmark sound since the late 19th century.

Preservation Hall itself is a major tourist attraction, but it's not touristy in the least. In a ramshackle wooden building in the French Quarter, elderly men in black suits and ties play the traditional New Orleans jazz they've played for half a century or more, music passed down to them from men who often had learned it the century *before* last. It's the real deal. Jaffe, 39, took over stewardship of the Hall from his parents the week after graduating from Oberlin in 1993. As he updates it for the 21st century, he walks a line: keeping tradition sacred, but also relevant and exciting for a new generation.

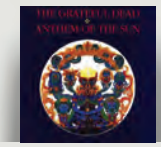
"At 22, when I took over," Jaffe says, "I was petrified that when the original Preservation Hall band passed away that we'd cease to exist. But by the late '90s [as some original members were replaced] I began to see that people would still come see us for this very real New Orleans experience."

The collaborators on *Preservation* seem to feel the same way. Carlile recorded the traditional hymn "The Old Rugged Cross" on a Sunday, with Hall guitarist/banjo player Carl LeBlanc, a veteran of the last incarnation of Sun Ra's Arkestra. "The Preservation Hall band's performance of these standards and their obvious passion and roots in New Orleans music sets the bar tremendously high for recording artists in any genre," Carlile says. "I think the pairing of the performers with the Preservation Hall band bridges gaps in a really cool way." **ALISON FENSTERSTOCK**

the PASTE MAGAZINE 6 OUR FAVORITE *DEAD* BITS OF WHATEVER

1. **Nick Purdy, Publisher → Tower Records** Big-box retailers get a lot of flack from music fans for taking the fun and individuality out of record buying, but that's just because they're not Tower Records, the one big chain that somehow managed to have everything while still catering to real music lovers.

2.
Kevin Keller, Multimedia Producer → Thylacines By far the most badass marsupial that ever lived, Thylacines (also known as Tasmanian wolves) had stripes like a tiger and enormous mouths full of sharp teeth. And since they didn't go extinct until 1936, there are pictures to prove it.

3. **Steve LaBate, Associate Editor → Grateful Dead's *Anthem of the Sun*** This 1968 psychedelic masterpiece mind-bendingly threaded acid-drenched studio tracks with multiple layers of concert performances. In tandem with all the electronic tape manipulation and weird scraps of metal jammed into the grand piano to get those esoteric, cataclysmic sounds, the Dead created a sonic tapestry that set the table for modern pop experimenters like Animal Collective.


4. **Rachael Maddux, Assistant Editor → Hair** Americans spend billions of dollars a year on soaps, sprays and gels to prettify what is literally dead protein sprouting from their scalps. When you think of it that way, every day is a bad hair day.

5. **Nick Marino, Managing Editor → James Agee** He wrote the virtuosic, empathetic nonfiction masterpiece *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in his late 20s. He wrote the Pulitzer-winning novel *A Death In The Family* in his early 40s. And he died in the back seat of a taxi cab at age 45. Not a bad run.

6. **Austin L. Ray, Web Editor → The Dismemberment Plan** This band could've been huge. Instead, they quit while they were ahead—admirable, in a way, but also disappointing. The upside is that they left behind five excellent, hilarious, emotional, danceable albums. RIP, D-Plan.

7. **Kate Kiefer, Associate Editor → *Dexter*'s Ice Truck Killer** Dexter's brother gave him a run for his money by freezing bodies to minimize the mess before slicing them up, but—spoiler alert—our favorite blood-splatter analyst got him anyway.

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IN YOUR HEART

RHYTHM
IN YOUR SOUL

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Dr. Teeth & the Electric Mayhem

THE 50 GREATEST BAND NAMES OF ALL TIME

Naming your band is an art all its own—one that doesn't necessarily correlate with an ability to make music. In high school, I got a notion to call my band Something Completely Different, just so we could be introduced at our school's talent show with the Monty Python line, "...and now for Something Completely Different." Thankfully, my bandmates outvoted me. A good band name can be an exercise in cleverness, a perfect descriptor or just something that sounds cool. We come across thousands of band names in our line of work, and we've narrowed them down—by category—to the best of the best. **JOSH JACKSON**

THE BRILLIANTLY GENERIC

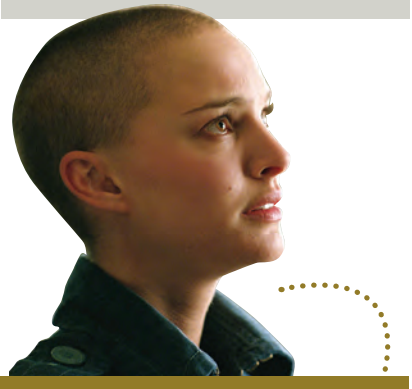
Back in 1962, ? and the Mysterians launched a pair of trends, giving themselves an enigmatic moniker and introducing punctuation into band names. This culminated 34 years later with !!!. In between the two, these five bands used generalities to really make a name for themselves.

1. **X** With a frontman named John Doe, no less.
2. **THE THE** One of three bands on this list of 50 to contain Johnny Marr.
3. **THE WHO** They were originally, and less memorably, known as The Detours.
4. **THE BAND** Definitive name backed up by the music.
5. **THE SMITHS** As Morrissey told *Melody Maker* in 1984, it was "time that the ordinary folk of the world showed their faces."

THE EVOCATIVE IMAGE

Most of these speak for themselves, though I'll add that Paradise Vendors get bonus points for naming themselves after a hot dog stand from *A Confederacy of Dunces*.

1. THROWING MUSES 2. BUTTHOLE SURFERS 3. MEAT PUPPETS 4. THROBBING GRISTLE 5. PARADISE VENDORS



THE CELEBRITY TRIBUTE

Nothing says "I love you" quite like mashing up your name with a bucket of fried chicken or a recreational vehicle. We appreciate these clever takes on established personalities.

1. **JFKFC** An Atlanta metal supergroup featuring members of Dick Delicious and the Tasty Testicles, and Artimus Pyledriver
2. **CAMPER VAN BEETHOVEN** Cracker never had quite the same ring.
3. **THE LEE HARVEY KEITEL BAND** These '90s rockers had a song called "Our Love Has Died a William Holden Death." We assume that either means by injuries from a fall, or *Bridge on the River Kwai*-style—at Sir Alec Guinness' feet.
4. **NATALIE PORTMAN'S SHAVED HEAD** The band puts the *V for Vendetta* actress on the guest list of every show, to no avail.
5. **PROPAGANDHI** Great name, though Canadian bandmates Chris Hannah and Jordan Samolesky also ran a label that featured the group Swallowing Shit.

Dr. Teeth photo © The Muppets Studio, LLC.

TRUTH IN ADVERTISING

Sometimes a glance at the band's name tells you everything you need to know.

1. **THE LIBERTINES** Pete Doherty took his band's name to heart.
2. **THE PAINS OF BEING PURE AT HEART** The music is even *more* precious than the name sounds, and I'm OK with that.
3. **THE CLASH** God bless Joe Strummer for living up to it.
4. **PARLIAMENT FUNKADELIC** And George Clinton is Prime Minister.
5. **MORPHINE** Mark Sandman's laid-back, low-rock minimalism was addictive.

THE GRAND HYPERBOLE

Self-aggrandizing names just scream to be mocked. But these five bands back up the boasting.

1. **THE SUPREMES** Diana Ross initially thought the name was too masculine, but now nothing sounds so wonderfully feminine.
2. **THE JESUS AND MARY CHAIN** The Beatles may have been bigger than Jesus, but their name was a bad pun about an insect.
3. **QUEEN** Freddie Mercury said it best: "It's very regal obviously, and it sounds splendid."
4. **SUPREME BEINGS OF LEISURE** also falls under Truth In Advertising
5. **T. REX** Marc Bolan lived up to the bigger-than-your-average-carnivorous-dinosaur name.

MEEK AND MILD

A great band name doesn't always have to be grand or scary. Sometimes it can be just the opposite.

1. **SUPER FURRY ANIMALS** A band of great big Welshmen of varying levels of hairiness.
2. **ECHO & THE BUNNYMEN** Ian McCulloch's previous two bands would have also qualified for The Great Hyperbole (Crucial Three) and The Evocative Image (A Shallow Madness).
3. **FUZZY BUNNY SLIPPERS** The ska is sweeter in New Jersey.
4. **MODEST MOUSE** Pulled from a Virginia Woolf line, but I still wouldn't mess with Isaac Brock.
5. **STARTLED INSECTS** Who can forget their 1987 breakout LP, *Curse of the Pheromones*?

THE COMPLETE SENTENCE

1. **BETTY'S NOT A VITAMIN** And yet Fred, Wilma, Barney and Dino all were. Thankfully Bayer fixed this oversight in 1994.
2. **SOMEONE STILL LOVES YOU BORIS YELTSIN** The Russian President left office with approval ratings that would make George W. Bush look like George Washington, but these guys don't care.
3. **GET CAPE. WEAR CAPE. FLY** If it were only so easy...

4. **DOGS DIE IN HOT CARS** Both a band name and a public service announcement.
5. **FOLLOW FOR NOW** A command from a non-committal cult leader

THE RIDICULOUSLY OMINOUS

I've always preferred the ridiculously ominous to the just plain ominous.

1. **...AND YOU WILL KNOW US BY THE TRAIL OF DEAD** Don't you wonder what comes before those ellipses?
2. **I LOVE YOU BUT I'VE CHOSEN DARKNESS** Still, he *does* love you.
3. **MEGADETH** A real unit of measurement—the death of one million people in a nuclear disaster.
4. **BLOODY WALL OF GORE** If you're gonna go gore, you gotta go all the way.
5. **MOTÖRHEAD** Umlauts should never be put into the hands of amateurs. Fortunately, Lemmy is no amateur.

THE NON-SEQUITUR OVERLAP

There are hundreds of terrible band name puns. We love all of them, especially these.

1. **JAPANCAKES**
2. **THE DICTATORTOTS**
3. **THE SWIMMING POOL QS**
4. **HOSTILE COMB-OVER**
5. **ABRACADAVER**

THE BEST OF THE BEST

Our five absolute favorites, in order:

1. **DR. TEETH AND THE ELECTRIC MAYHEM** Leave it to The Muppets to come up with the BEST BAND NAME OF ALL TIME.
2. **GUIDED BY VOICES** This powerful name always seemed like the secret to Robert Pollard's prolific and bizarre output.
3. **JOY DIVISION** The name came from the 1955 novel *House of Dolls*, in which a Nazi concentration camp had a prostitution arm.
4. **MAN OR ASTRO-MAN?** After seeing them live, you still wonder.
5. **WE WERE PROMISED JETPACKS** Yes, Scottish frontman Adam Thompson, we sure were.

EARS WE TRUST

Hot Chip

ALEXIS TAYLOR (SECOND FROM LEFT) AND OWEN CLARKE (SECOND FROM RIGHT) SING AND PLAY IN HOT CHIP, THE BOUNDARY-BREAKING ELECTRONIC ENSEMBLE WHOSE NEW RECORD, *ONE LIFE STAND*, IS REVIEWED ON PG 62. HERE'S WHAT THEY'RE LISTENING TO AND LOVING.

Alex Chilton *Like Flies on Sherbert*

What electricity sounds like on record. The most confrontational, beautiful mess of music and high spirits recorded to tape. A turning point in my life, discovering this record. (Taylor)

Glen Campbell "Less of Me"

A wonderful hymn to the virtue of selflessness, introduced to me via a Will Oldham cover version. (Taylor)

Prokofiev *Peter and the Wolf,* narrated by Leonard Bernstein

My current favorite music, caught up in memories of hearing it as a child, and playing the same tape right now to my daughter. One day soon I will mix it with "Strings of Life" by Derrick May in a DJ set. (Taylor)

Jürgen Paape "Ofterschwang"

This is the music of the goblin circus. This is madness. Just mad. You will be physically transformed by this. (Clarke)

Brian Eno "No One Receiving"

Morse code. Bottles. He gets a snare to shudder. Brian Eno is a constant reminder of the simple fact that you can do anything with music. He's the refresh button for my clouded moments. (Clarke)

Roxy Music "Angel Eyes"

This track is criminally good. It will not be stopped. Its crimes are: Rototoms. Sax. Harps. But it gets off scott-free and everything is fabulous. (Clarke)

THE NOTORIOUS ALEXANDER HAMILTON

A BROADWAY BARD TACKLES THE FOUNDING FATHER

On the night of May 12, 2009, actor and composer Lin-Manuel Miranda took the stage at the White House's Evening of Poetry, Music and Spoken Word. Visibly nervous, Miranda introduced his performance to the Beltway celebrities in attendance, including President Obama and the First Family. "It's a concept album about the life of someone I think embodies hip-hop: Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton," he explained to faint laughter as he assumed the character of Aaron Burr, Hamilton's assailant in the most iconic duel in U.S. history. Miranda then launched into a churning, piano-accompanied paean to the "ten dolla Founding Father without a father" that concluded with a standing ovation.

Miranda, 30, is usually more than comfortable with performing. While attending Wesleyan University, he was onstage every chance he got; in 2007, he wrote and starred in the Tony Award-winning Broadway musical *In the Heights*. But he remembers his White House stage fright with chagrin: "I saw Obama turn to Michelle and mouth 'This is great!' and then I was so nervous I couldn't look at them for the rest of the performance," he says. "And any day that starts with a van ride to the White House with James Earl Jones is a surreal day to begin with."

Alexander Hamilton is an unlikely topic for hip-hop, a genre more often concerned with inventories of property and sexual conquest than the author of the Federalist Papers. But the connection is obvious to Miranda, who dreamt up *The Hamilton Mixtape* between performances of *In the Heights*: "I read an amazing biography of Hamilton by Ron Chernow, and every other chapter I was going, 'This is Tupac! This is Biggie!'" he explains. "Hamilton pulled himself up out of nothing, the rags-to-riches story. That's the American story, and it's also the hip-hop story."

After his successful White House premiere, Miranda is eager to write the rest of the album. His tone becomes exuberant as he rattles off ideas for other tracks, tracing the similarities between Hamilton and Tupac, both famous for their verbal and written barbs: "Hamilton caught beef with John Adams, while Adams was president. He had an incredible war of words with Thomas Jefferson. James Madison was his friend, but then went over to Jefferson's side," Miranda says. "And these weren't battles over who was the best rapper, these were battles over what kind of country this should be. What could be more interesting to rap about than that?" **MICHAEL SABA**

Hot Chip photo by Bevis Martin and Charlie Youle. Miranda photo by Joan Marcus

PASTE PRESENTS:

A HISTORY LESSON

THE OVERMOUNTAIN MEN A REVOLUTIONARY BAND

On tour with his band The Avett Brothers in 2005, bassist Bob Crawford began reading a thick tome entitled Washington's Army. Little did he know that seeds were being planted for his future side project, The Overmountain Men.

"Sometimes," Crawford says, "people ask, 'Why do you read those history books? It's like a textbook.' I do it because I want to understand where it all began—how'd we get to this spot right here? ... People love romance, action and adventure, suspense and intrigue, good guys and bad guys, good guys who turn bad, bad guys who turn good—and that all exists in American history. It's all there—all the greatest aspects of literature."

Along the way, Crawford found kindred spirits who shared his passion—singer/guitarist David Childers (of rock 'n' roll band The Modern Don Juans) and his son, drummer Robert Childers—and they eventually began collaborating on songs rooted in American history.

"I'm more toward the military side, and Bob is more toward the political side," the eldest Childers explains in his deep Carolina drawl, "and that colors the songs. I love to write about people—historical people like Rembrandt or Stonewall Jackson ... but there's the unknowns, too, like the guy in 'Leaving England' who's heading to America."

Some other relative unknowns are the project's namesake, The Overmountain Men, a band of fierce frontiersman from just west of the Appalachians who played a key role in the American victory at the Battle of King's Mountain during the Revolutionary War—and from whom Childers and Overmountain Men guitarist Randy Saxon are directly descended. "My people were from back up in the hills," Childers says, "where the Overmountain Men came from. Scotch-Irish savages."

Fittingly, Childers, Crawford and their gang of musicians —Crawford likens the band to "a little militia crossing the mountains to meet the British and picking up different people along the way"—recorded their rootsy, eclectic debut, *Glorious Day*, at Gastonia, N.C.'s Old House Studios, built out of a tiny, 150-year-old farmhouse just 15 miles from King's Mountain.

The main challenge in pulling off these historical songs, Crawford says, is, "Can you capture another world, but not make it a novelty? The point for me, ultimately, is to take some of these characters I meet and fall in love with when I read about them, and tell their tale in a way that's not like 'Yankee Doodle Dandy' or some novelty song like 'Davy Crockett.'" **STEVE LABATE**

Overmountain Men photo by Mike Hammer

➥ Massive Attack

TRIP-HOP THE SUPER-IMPOSSIBLE BRAIN-BUSTING QUIZ

In 2008, Portishead—one of pop music's great sleeping giants—awoke from hibernation to deliver its first studio album in 11 years. Then late last year, snarling rapper Tricky reissued his 1995 classic *Maxinquaye*. This month's release of *Heligoland*, Massive Attack's first new album in seven years, completes the unlikely resurgence of trip-hop—a genre that blew up in the early '90s and almost instantly vanished, only to inch its way back into the public consciousness nearly 20 years later. Centered in the British harbor town of Bristol and revolving around these three artists, trip-hop was known for cinematic soundscapes, paranoid moods, scratchy rapping and sluggish tempos. Sound like fun? It was! Here, we test your knowledge of this surprisingly resilient sound. **NICK MARINO**

1 Before trip-hop came along, which actor was Bristol's claim to fame?
A) Laurence Olivier **B)** Terence Stamp
C) Michael Caine **D)** Cary Grant

2 Tricky does *not* blame a woman for which of the following on "Suffocated Love?"
A) Slitting his wrist **B)** Stealing his car
C) Spending his money
D) Making him prematurely ejaculate

3 Portishead's "Glory Box," Tricky's "Overcome" and Massive Attack's "(Exchange)" all sample which deceased soulman?
A) Curtis Mayfield **B)** Isaac Hayes
C) Barry White **D)** James Brown

4 As a young man, Portishead's Geoff Barrow worked for Coach House studio in what capacity?
A) Janitor **B)** Receptionist
C) Tea boy **D)** Television spokesman

5 Which chanteuse did *not* collaborate with Massive Attack on one of its first four proper studio albums?
A) Elizabeth Fraser
B) Tracey Thorn
C) Kate Bush
D) Sinéad O'Connor

6 True or false: Portishead's third studio album, *Third*, opens with a Portuguese reading of a Wicca tenet?

7 The video for Massive Attack's "Teardrop" stars which of the following?
A) A dying soldier
B) A sobbing astronaut
C) A singing fetus
D) A largemouth bass

8 What is Tricky's real name?
A) Adrian Nicholas M. Thaws
B) O'Shea Thadius Jackson
C) Barnaby James Tompkins-Rice
D) Miles Benjamin Anthony Robinson

9 Massive Attack did *not* appear on the soundtrack to which of the following?
A) *Mulholland Dr.*
B) *Batman Forever*
C) *Moulin Rouge*
D) *House M.D.*

10 In how many cities was Portishead's *Roseland NYC Live* album recorded?
A) One **B)** Two
C) Three **D)** Four

Answers: 1) d 2) b 3) b 4) c 5) c 6) True 7) c 8) a 9) a 10) c

Photo by Hamish Brown

AMERICAN MUSIC CLUB AND THE DREGS OF WINTER

BY ANDY WHITMAN ILLUSTRATION BY EDWARD MCGOWAN

February in Columbus, Ohio, means the fourth consecutive month without sunshine. Eight months of the year, it's a great place to live. But during the winter, a dismal pall settles over the city. Too far south to offer much in the way of invigorating winter sports, but too far north to escape the general crud, the typical Columbus winter day features ominous grey clouds, sleet and temperatures hovering around 35 degrees. Coincidentally, this is also how Dante describes the innermost circle of hell.

Mark Eitzel—lead singer and songwriter for California mopesters American Music Club—was born here. I know of no better way to explain the gloriously conflicted fury and resignation that permeates his music: Yeah, he suggests, the horror will probably pass. Then again, it might kill you before it does. No songwriter is better suited to soundtracking these desperate February days when it seems spring will never arrive.

The American Music Club album I play most frequently this time of year is *Mercury*, the band's 1993 shot at the big time on Reprise Records. It's a wondrous thing; dissolute lounge music from the world's most mournful bar—the kind of place where the patrons read James Joyce and Samuel Beckett in darkened corner booths, the jukebox plays Elvis Costello and Patsy Cline, and everybody's a smartass with a broken heart.

The album sold squat, perhaps sabotaged by Eitzel's unremitting gloom, and by his conflicted attmept at "stardom." After all, this is a record that features made-up dialogue between Eitzel and Johnny Mathis. And Johnny shuts him up and puts him in his place. "A real showman knows how to disappear in the spotlight," the imaginary Mathis tells him.

But Eitzel doesn't know how to shut up or disappear. He's a barstool poet with the soul of a romantic, and he declaims in the proud tradition of everyone from Dylan Thomas and Jack Kerouac to Tom Waits and Craig Finn. This approach permeates every song on the album, but I hear it most clearly on "If I Had a Hammer," which bears the same name as the song written by Pete Seeger and popularized by Peter, Paul, and Mary, but is light-years removed from that protest anthem's hopeful resolution. This hammer is more likely to crush the songwriter's skull. It's a quiet, resigned, despairing tune that erupts in impotent fury, capturing the essence of Mark Eitzel's philosophy: Life sucks, but what can you do? I love the song for its unbearable sadness, and because Mark Eitzel is the poet of February grey:

Eitzel doesn't know how to shut up or disappear. He's a barstool poet with the soul of a romantic, and he declaims in the proud tradition of everyone from Dylan Thomas to Jack Kerouac to Tom Waits and Craig Finn.

Give me the keys to your theme park
Bury me under your layer of snow
And watch me ride all the rides
Around and around I go

I don't know if I've reached the bottom yet
And I don't know if the ice has finally begun to set
I feel time pass like a joy I tried so hard to relearn
But somewhere along the line
I passed the point of no return.

It's claustrophobic winter music for people who've been inside too long. Even the album's final track, "Will You Find Me?"—which at least posits the possibility of being found—fades away in a wash of wistful strings. It's a nice thought, Eitzel seems to be telling us. Now back to reality. There are other American Music Club albums, some of them almost as good as *Mercury*, but none of them sustains the mood of loss and despair.

I can't remain in those desolate regions very long. But in mid-February, sinking under a succession of drab, interchangeable days, it's just about the best music in the world. Sunshine? What's that?

➥ ANDY WHITMAN IS A *PASTE* SENIOR CONTRIBUTING EDITOR.

WARPAINT PREPARES FOR BATTLE

"Girls tend to not take seriously the talents they could have," says Theresa Wayman, one of Warpaint's three frontwomen. "Maybe they sing or maybe they play guitar a little bit, but there aren't many that want to become like Jimi Hendrix."

There's not much shredding in Warpaint's electric ladyland, but there's plenty of rock 'n' roll aspiration. The trio's dreamy shoegaze melodies are paired with post-punk dissonance and fueled by the bandmates' pure magnetism and instrumental chops. Warpaint released its six-song debut EP, *Exquisite Corpse*, last October, then signed with Rough Trade mere days after the CMJ Music Marathon. Produced by Red Hot Chili Peppers guitarist John Frusciante, the EP is rife with tension and intrigue, with vocals held back for minutes at a time as the band builds walls of tension rivaling The Cure's *Disintegration*. "Beetles" captivates with Wayman's rap-singing wrung through an effects pedal, and "Billie Holiday" sets the sassy soul of Mary Wells' "My Guy" adrift in a slow churn of three-part harmony and Mellotron, with pathos enough to rip open tear ducts.

It remains to be heard how Warpaint's full-length debut, due this spring, will compare. After three different guys filled in for founding drummer and bassist Jenny Lee Lindberg's actress sister Shannyn Sossamon, Australian percussionist Stella Mozgawa will take to the kit for recording sessions in Portland this winter. The band also plans to try out drum machines, strings, piano and acoustic guitar—elements that don't usually figure into Warpaint's live show.

A few more rock legends will join Hendrix in their pantheon of inspiration, too. "We're going to have Wilson-Phillips harmonies," axewoman Emily Kokal jokes. "George Harrison's ghost is going to tell me how to play guitar." **REED FISCHER**

WARPAINT

HOMETOWN: Los Angeles
ALBUM: *Exquisite Corpse* EP
BAND MEMBERS: Emily Kokal (vocals, guitar), Jenny Lee Lindberg (vocals, bass), Theresa Wayman (vocals, guitar, keyboards)
FOR FANS OF: Bat For Lashes, Björk, Cat Power

Photo by Angel Ceballos

BAND

FREELANCE WHALES A MATCH MADE ON CRAIGSLIST

When Freelance Whales frontman Judah Dadone was growing up on 20 acres of woods outside Wilmington, Del., his part-Cherokee nanny told him that horses and dogs—and sometimes kids—could see spirits. By age six, he began to make room for the ghost of a young girl he sensed living in his house. These memories, along with bits of dream journaling, weave their way loosely through *Weathervanes*, Freelance Whales' debut LP on Frenchkiss Records.

"For me, the record is a sort of pre-adolescent love story between a young boy and his imaginary friend, or an actual ghost," Dardone says. "Because he interacts with her mostly in his dreams, the logic of the lyrics undergoes a sort of distortion, or they tend towards the magically realistic."

A few years ago, Brooklyn-based Dadone began gathering *Weathervanes*' odd collection of instruments—a banjo from his stepfather, a harmonium from India, a water phone from the Lower East Side—and then used Craigslist to find bandmates from across the city to play them all.

The album captures that same whimsy with enough layers of peculiar instrumentation to make Sufjan Stevens jealous. And thanks again to Craigslist, Freelance Whales will be adding to that roster of strange instruments very soon. "Kevin Read and myself decided recently that we wanted to make an instrument that sounded like a chorus of Japanese flutes, which are typically made from bamboo," Dadone says. "We looked on Craigslist and found an Amish family in Lancaster, Penn., who allowed us to come work on their farm for a few days, help them with their bamboo harvest, and keep a load of it for ourselves. If we're not paralyzed by the irony of the Amish using Craigslist, and if our hand-craftiness doesn't fail us, we may have a bamboo pipe organ by mid 2010." **JOSH JACKSON**

FREELANCE WHALES

HOMETOWN: Brooklyn
ALBUM: *Weathervanes*
BAND MEMBERS: Judah Dadone (vocals), Doris Cellar, Chuck Criss, Jake Hyman, Kevin Read (all multi-instrumentalists)
FOR FANS OF: The Postal Service, Sufjan Stevens, Passion Pit

Photo by Katherine Butler

ELIF BATUMAN **TO RUSSIA, WITH LOVE**

"To think of Tolstoy eating a sandwich is intrinsically kind of funny," Elif Batuman says. The 32-year-old author usually calls San Francisco home, but right now she's sitting a continent and 10 time zones away in Istanbul, where she's "saving on rent." Through my Skype window I see a miniature picture of the dark-haired woman, who gazes slightly to the right and speaks swiftly as though she's watching her words fly by a little too fast. "He's this monumental figure, but he ate lunch."

And according to Batuman's first nonfiction book, *The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them*, out this month, Tolstoy also played tennis, fought with his wife and contracted pneumonia. Then he wrote *War and Peace*.

The tension between random real life and the organized narrative form is central to *The Possessed*. Led to study Russian literature through a series of coincidences (a Russian violin teacher here, an attempted linguistics major there) Batuman writes, "[In life] there may be interesting and moving experiences, but one thing is guaranteed: they won't naturally assume the shape of a wonderful book." So the Stanford graduate decided she would pursue the legacies of her favorite authors, reading their works and traveling the world to meet their families and visit their former homes. What ensued was fittingly chaotic. She spent five days at Tolstoy's snake-infested manor, examined Peter the Great's collection of embalmed organs and attempted to sleep in a St. Petersburg ice palace. A collection of essays chronicling her travels, *The Possessed* is a pilgrim's feverish diary—a devoted study of the Russian greats set against the backdrop of a tumultuous post-Soviet world.

ELIF BATUMAN
HOMETOWN: San Francisco
BOOK: *The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them*
FOR FANS OF: Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Anton Chekhov, Roz Chast

But Batuman found that even by immersing herself in literature, she was unable to spell out her own narrative. "You base your actions on a projected ending, which you actually don't know," she says now, sipping tea in Istanbul. "However, when you reach the crucial point, and the pinnacle event doesn't occur, you just need to go on and something else will happen." *The Possessed* is the ideal chronicle of these unexpected "something elses," which, as Tolstoy himself knew, actually make for a great story. **RACHEL DOVEY**

Photo by Mikhail Lemkhin

Photo by Julia Davis

MOONLIGHT BRIDE CHATTANOOGA ROCK CITY

Outside of Greyfriar's Coffee in downtown Chattanooga, Tenn., the late-November sky is blue, the leaves orange and the pedestrians are shedding their outermost layers. Inside, three-fourths of local band Moonlight Bride sit around a low table, sleepy, drinking iced coffee. This is the kind of town where the mercury pushing 70 the day before Thanksgiving isn't uncommon. But making decent rock music? That's another matter.

Blues legend Bessie Smith was born here and R&B superstar Usher grew up in town, but despite its thriving local-arts scene and proximity to musical hotbeds in Nashville, Atlanta, Memphis and Chapel Hill, Chattanooga has never developed a music scene to speak of. Most rock bands either decamp to bigger cities, or linger and burn out. But Moonlight Bride took a less likely third route—keep it local and thrive.

After about a year of constant live gigs, the band retreated to a warehouse practice space to hash out every last detail of its first LP, *Myths*. Released in October, the album comprises 10 dark, interwoven songs bound by the brooding guitar work of newest member Justin Grasham and lead singer Justin Wilcox's tremulous, bare-souled vocals, which are as haunted and alluring as the caves that riddle the rocky hills of the band's hometown.

It's a debut any local scene would be proud to claim, though only the faintest clues link it to Chattanooga. Wilcox sings about the church like it's an ex-lover, hinting at a fallout common even in the buckle of the Bible Belt. And then there's the cicadas. Drummer Matt Livingston and bassist Tyke Calfee captured the insects' deafening drone—familiar to anyone who's spent a summer evening in the South—last July, in the woods behinds Wilcox's house, then used the recording to piece together *Myths*' second and third tracks.

"Those kinds of sounds—that's just something you grow up with and you love," Calfee says. "Sometimes you take it for granted." And sometimes, all the beauty in the world is right in your back yard. **RACHAEL MADDUX**

MOONLIGHT BRIDE

HOMETOWN: Chattanooga, Tenn.
ALBUM: *Myths*
BAND MEMBERS: Tyke Calfee (bass), Justin Grasham (guitar), Matt Livingston (drums), Justin Wilcox (keyboards, guitar, vocals)
FOR FANS OF: Arcade Fire, Joy Division, Pulp

WONDERFUL THINGS
APRIL SMITH AND THE GREAT PICTURE SHOW

Judging from some tracks on her new album *Songs for a Sinking Ship*, Brooklyn singer/songwriter April Smith is quite the burlesque bad girl. Verbally smacking down the competition for her man's affections ("Dixie Boy") and confessing to sins apparently too atrocious to mention ("Terrible Things"), Smith takes a ride into the annals of vintage Mason-Dixon pop, packing a sound full of sassy hooks and swinging rhythms.

When I meet her at a generic SoHo deli on an early December afternoon, it becomes clear that the real April Smith is far less confrontational than her music suggests. The first sign is when she whips out her camera to play a video of her border collie, Scout, hamming it up before a bath. And the enthusiasm with which she explains converting her band's old tour bus to run on alternative fuel confirms it. "You have to make sure the engine and injection pump are willing to run on vegetable oil," Smith says over egg sandwiches before heading to a charity gig for an eco-friendly clothing line. "It's definitely a labor of love."

A devout vegetarian with a contagious smile, she's definitely more Southern Comfort than Wild Turkey, but she revels in the melodramatic, TV-inspired whimsy she concocts with her four-piece band, The Great Picture Show. "Terrible Things," for example, is actually an ode to *Dexter*, the Showtime series about a morally ambiguous serial killer. "I'm a huge TV addict—it's really bad, especially when it's cold out," Smith says. "I'll only go outside to walk my dog, and the rest of the time, the TV's always on." *Law & Order*, *Californication* (which recently licensed "Terrible Things" for its online promos) as well as shows and books about historical shipwrecks round out her suitably noir pop-cultural interests.

Smith's megaphone optimism remains front and center throughout the tumultuous old-timey jams on *Songs For A Sinking Ship*, recorded with the $13,000 she raised last year via website Kickstarter. "If you're going down, you may as well have a smile on your face," she says. "If times are bad, at least we're having fun."

SEAN EDGAR

APRIL SMITH AND THE GREAT PICTURE SHOW

HOMETOWN: Brooklyn
ALBUM: *Songs for a Sinking Ship*
BAND MEMBERS: April Smith (vocals, guitar), Elliot Jacobson (drums), Brandon Lowry (keyboards), Marty O'Kane (guitar), Stevens (bass)
FOR FANS OF: Amanda Palmer, Neko Case, The Andrews Sisters

Photo by Michelle McSwain

ACTORS

SHOOTING STARLETS

THREE SOON-TO-BE LEADING LADIES

Young actresses these days are more likely to get press for losing or gaining weight and/or showing up at Hollywood bashes sans underoos than for any actual acting skills. So imagine our delight when, in recent months, three obvious über-talents—Zoe Kazan, Carey Mulligan and Mia Wasikowska—burst forth onto the silver screen with chops enough to utterly confound the gossip mill.

RACHAEL MADDUX

1 ZOE KAZAN The 26-year-old recent Yale graduate (and granddaughter of Elia) got her start off-Broadway and moved up to the real thing before setting her sights on the cinema. After small parts in *Revolutionary Road* and *Me and Orson Welles*, Kazan's biggest role to date comes in director Bradley Rust Gray's *The Exploding Girl*. She plays the film's title character, which she helped Gray shape as he wrote the script. Her performance is tenacious, tender, ultimately cathartic—and bound to make her a star.

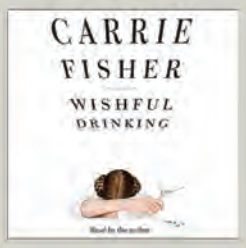
2 CAREY MULLIGAN Mulligan got her start in British period pieces—Austen, Dickens—before playing a young woman searching for herself among homework and a love affair in last fall's *An Education*. She's 24, but there's something both beguiling and arresting in her droll face and studied manner—she could easily play roles years younger or older. In 2010, Mulligan will appear in *Wall Street 2: Money Never Sleeps* alongside, well, everyone, and will return to her literary-adaptation roots with *Brighton Rock* (based on a Graham Greene novel) and *Never Let Me Go*, based on Kazuo Ishiguro's novel about a boarding school in the countryside of a dystopian-future Britain.

3 MIA WASIKOWSKA From the hills of Tennessee in last fall's *That Evening Sun* to the depths of Tim Burton's strange mind in the upcoming *Alice in Wonderland*, this 20-year-old is quickly becoming known for roles that take her far outside her native Australia. With her careful, knowing onscreen presence, Wasikowska has more than held her own against Hal Holbrook and Johnny Depp in the roles of their lifetimes, though she's still waiting for the definitive moment of her young career—perhaps it'll be in the upcoming, currently-untitled Gus Van Sant project in which she'll star, or Cary Fukunaga's *Jane Eyre* adaptation, for which she's rumored to have been cast as the titular lovelorn governess.

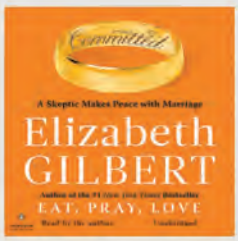
Zoe Kazan photo courtesy of Oscilloscope Laboratories. Carey Mulligan photo by Kerry Brown, courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics. Mia Wasikowska photo by Cooper Dunn.

PASTE RECOMMENDS @ AUDIBLE.COM

The Maltese Falcon
by Dashiell Hammett
Narrated by William Dufris



Wishful Drinking
by Carrie Fisher
Narrated by Carrie Fisher



Commited
by Elizabeth Gilbert
Narrated by Elizabeth Gilbert

The Last Station: A Novel of Tolstoy's Last Year
by Jay Parini
Narrated by Kirby Heyborne, Lorna Raver, Rebecca Lowman, Mark Bramhall, Richard McGonagle, Robertson Dean

Let the Great World Spin
by Colum McCann
Narrated by Richard Poe, Gerard Doyle, Carol Monda, Johanna Parker, Ramón de Ocampo, Chris Sorenson, Patricia Floyd

audible.com

OUT OF THIS WORLD

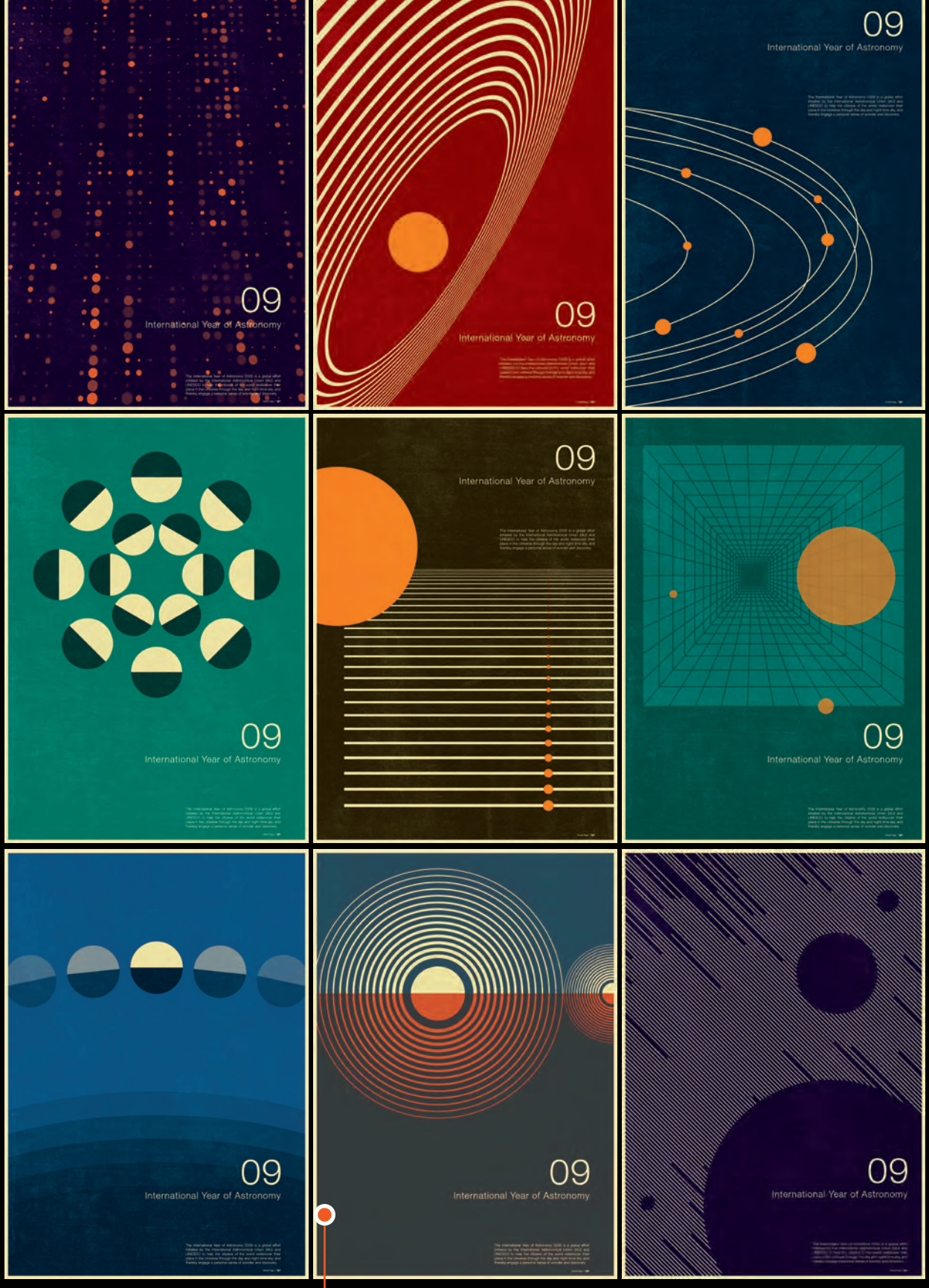
INTERSTELLAR ITEMS YOU CAN USE

The Skywalker sneakers by Adidas
$100 Adidas.com/originals
The shoe company collaborated with Lucasfilm for this collection of futuristic kicks. Our favorite pair mixes an avant-garde tribute to Luke Skywalker with Adidas' classic look.

Sake Bomb Decanter and four cups
$98 SakeBombStore.com
Meant to be a clever take on the term "sake bomb," this modern decanter has a certain star quality.

Sunspots Ring
$98 SundanceCatalog.com
The organic design and combination of copper and oxidized silver bring to mind the sun's dark spots without being overly obvious or scientific.

Selk'Bag
$99-$299 SelkBagUSA.com
This sleeping bag will keep you warm *and* make you look like a spaceman—clearly a win/win.



International Year Of Astronomy prints $40-$60 SimonPage.co.uk
Simon Page's series was a personal project until International Year Of Astronomy organizers contacted him through Flickr and asked if they could use his designs for promotional posters. "The designs were inspired mainly from illustrations in old '60s and '70s science textbooks of images used to depict gravitational forces and planetary motion," Page says of the nostalgic, minimalist posters.

Is Indie Dead?

BY RACHAEL MADDUX
ILLUSTRATIONS BY SAMUEL BOSMA

IN 1966, JOHN T. ELSON POSED A DANGEROUS QUESTION. THE *TIME* MAGAZINE EDITOR, IN A NOW-LEGENDARY ESSAY, ASKED: IS GOD DEAD? "IT IS A QUESTION THAT TANTALIZES BOTH BELIEVERS, WHO PERHAPS SECRETLY FEAR THAT HE IS, AND ATHEISTS, WHO POSSIBLY SUSPECT THAT THE ANSWER IS NO," HE WROTE. SPELLED OUT IN RED LETTERS ON THE MAGAZINE'S BIBLE-BLACK COVER, THE QUESTION AROUSED DISMAY AND DISSENT IN NEWSPAPER EDITORIALS, FAMILY ROOMS AND SACRISTIES ACROSS THE COUNTRY, DESPITE THE FACT THAT ELSON SKIRTED A DEFINITIVE ANSWER TO HIS OWN LOADED QUERY.

Ten years later, another question was posed, though much less formally. In the 1970s and into the '80s, beneath the surface of a placid mainstream culture, a growing mass in shredded clothes, with flailing bodies and untamed voices welled up, howling in unison: Are *we* dead? This movement started in scattered urban centers and then spread, flourishing on obscure LPs and in the black-and-white photocopied pages of fan-made 'zines, traded like fine tea from the Orient. It took refuge on low-frequency college radio stations, where DJs blasted the gospel of those wild men and women to listeners who scrawled their own parables with their own furious bands. God may have been usurped in the '60s, but these kids were baring their teeth, sharpening their knives, preparing to slaughter the idol that rose in God's place, the slicked-smooth supreme being of Pop. They wouldn't make money doing it, they wouldn't be famous, they wouldn't fit in—and they not only braced themselves against these realities, they adopted them as their core tenets, their creed.

In 2010, we again find ourselves in strange times. More than 20 years have passed since the punk movement and its offspring ground a steel-toed boot into the shin of America's cultural consciousness, and in that time we've seen it rise up, triumph and retreat in an endless cycle, each time leaving shards of itself behind to float or sink in the mainstream. What we've called it has never been stable—it's been known alternately as "punk" for its early attitude, "underground" for where it happened, "alternative" when the mainstream held it up as an antidote to its own poison—each of these picked up then sloughed off when the semantic baggage grew too unwieldy.

Most recently, "indie"—long thrown around as a signifier of how it got done (i.e. independently)—has become the nom du jour. "When I first heard the term 'indie rock,' it was about business practices," says Slim Moon, who came of age as a punk fan in the 1980s, founded the Kill Rock Stars label in the '90s, and now helms Shotclock Management out of Portland, Ore. "Major labels being publicly held corporations, their primary motive has to be to make money for stockholders. And the distinctions that I think indie labels were trying to make was, 'We're independent of that system so we have lots of reasons for doing this: We're doing this for politics, we're doing this for cool factor, we're doing it for aesthetics, we're doing it for community, but we're not just doing it for money.'"

Of course, the term "indie" is troubled now, too. Indie is, at once, a genre (of music first, and then of film, books, video games and anything else with a perceived arty sensibility, regardless of its relationship to a corporation), an ethos, a business model, a demographic and a marketing tool. It can signify everything, and it can signify nothing. It stands among the most important, potentially sustainable and meaningful movements in American popular culture—not just music, but for the whole cultural landscape. But because it was originally sculpted more in terms of what it opposed than what it stood for, the only universally held truth about "indie" is that nobody agrees on what it means.

We have several forces to thank for this growing, increasingly toxic confusion: a mainstream culture never above poaching; a precariously teetering music industry; an Internet booming harder than the Old West, with less rules and more cowboy posturing; plus, an aging movement whose original mix of urgent otherness and charming hubris has—for many members of its second generation—simmered down to solipsism and entitlement.

There's this old parable, the tale of the blind men and the elephant. The men are asked to describe the enormous creature based on how it feels; the one who touches its trunk says an elephant is like a giant snake, the one who touches its tail says it's like a rope, the one who touches its leg says it's like a tree trunk,

and so on. No one can see the whole beast, no one can feel it all, no one can tell what it is. Indie has become this elephant, and its attendants—its fans, practitioners and detractors—are the blind men, grasping for the truth about a creature that's growing bigger all the time. It looms so increasingly large as to obscure its own hugeness—a writhing, hydra-headed beast that renders itself nearly invisible by filling up our entire field of vision. It's a limping, disoriented creature unsure of its own nature.

And so today we ask yet another question: Is indie dead?

When Elson wrote his *Time* essay in 1966, he was responding to a sense of spiritual ennui gripping not only America but most of the West; a kind of grand-scale parochial identity crisis some 2,000 years in the making. In particular he was responding to Friedrich Nietzsche's assertion, more than 80 years prior, that God is dead—not that there had never been a God, but that there had been, and that we as humans had done away with him. When everything God offered—moral context, stability, certainty—had been questioned, abused or found elsewhere, when the idea of and word "God" no longer necessitated power, Nietzsche proffered that God as a force, as a being, became irrelevant, meaningless, hollow.

Dead.

Elson wrote of some believers who accepted God's death as truth but chose to continue as if nothing was different, just to maintain the order of their lives and the world. Indie is an artistic ideal, not a world religion, so while it faces the same dilemma—as a word that once meant so much, and still does to some, but has virtually lost all meaning and may now be doing more harm than good—there's no need to be so careful. We can tear down this idol with reckless abandon because, to our question, there is a concrete answer: Indie is dead. It has killed itself.

SEEING THINGS DIFFERENTLY

Those around for punk's clarion call could've never imagined that their festering rage would lead to this. If the movement's earliest adopters had skipped forward 25 or 30 years to see what they'd indirectly wrought, they might've hung themselves by their guitar strings.

Stripped of all its developmental context, what they would see and hear would be jarring: "indie" bands on the radio, "indie" bands on television, "indie" bands on the *Billboard* charts, "indie" bands if not on the cover then certainly teeming inside mainstream magazines. And that's only the small slice of the media landscape they'd be able to recognize on their own. We'd have to coach them through the whole Internet thing, pulling up *Pitchfork*, explaining "pageviews" and blogs, watching their eyes bug as they process the modern world and then narrow back down as they contemplate all these new names: "Spoon? Death Cab for Cutie? Pavement *reunion*? Who are these guys?"

"They're indie bands," we'd tell them, and then we'd give them a little time to let it sink in, maybe play *Slanted and Enchanted*—ease them in slow before dropping the first bombshell.

And what would that be? Well, for starters, what about how this Death Cab band is actually signed to, um, Atlantic Records: "Yeah, *that* Atlantic. It's owned by Warner now. Yeah, that Warner. Anyway, they started out on an indie label—oh no, you wouldn't know it, it's called Barsuk, started in '94. One of those Seattle labels. What's up with Seattle? Let's save that for later. Anyway, Death Cab, yeah—signed with Atlantic a couple years ago and everyone got all clammy and nervous about it, thought the band had probably sold out and figured we should resign ourselves to just loving *The Photo Album* and politely ignore whatever else was gonna happen down the line. Then the album came out and, you know, it wasn't so bad. What's that? Oh, yeah. People do still call them indie, yeah."

Or maybe we'd talk about Spoon. That might be easier to swallow: "So there's this label, Merge. Spoon's on it, a bunch of other great bands, too. The Merge folks have been doing their own thing for a while now, and Spoon's been with them for about five albums. People really dig 'em. But here's the crazy thing—you know *Billboard*? Well, they've got this chart now just for independent albums, and every record Spoon's put out has been on it. Except for the one they did with a major, Elektra—yeah, Elektra's owned by a major now, too, or at least it was before it folded—anyway, that album sold like crap, but the others have all done pretty well. The past two were even up in the *Billboard* 200 with all the pop stars. I know, right?"

Then later, maybe after a few PBRs: "OK, so let me tell you about this label Sub Pop. You haven't heard of it yet but you will pretty soon, I guess. These days, they're kind of this hero label because they've been consistently awesome for pretty much the past 20 years, just bam bam bam, one great, super-relevant band after another. The first big one, Nirvana—God, just brace yourself, trust me. I can't even explain. Anyway, they've got this reputation that precedes them. You know how you guys will go out to those gritty little record shops of yours and scrounge up everything you can find from, like, Homestead and Touch and Go and K and all that? We pretty much do that with Sub Pop. We just know it'll be good. Venerable, ha, yeah. Except here's the thing—they're part-owned by Warner. Yeah, 49 percent. Wasn't always that way, but it happened, you know? They're still trucking on and all, but some folks won't call them indie. Kinda revoked the badge."

And then after a few more beers: "Oh yeah, her? That's M.I.A. No, not 'Mia.' She's Sri Lankan—Sri Lankan, that's what I said. Well, I guess it would be electronica—yeah, like that guy Brian Eno, sort of. Most people now wouldn't say that, though. She's on Interscope, which is a part of Universal, which, right, is about as far away from indie as you can possibly get. But you know what's weird? She probably sings more about political issues and gives less of a shit about what people think of her than a whole lot of 'independent' rock bands right now. And so yeah, she's in with the indie folks, too. Where are all the guitars? I don't know, man. I don't know."

And as they chew their bottom lips in deep thought, twiddle the zippers on their leather jackets and cross and uncross their ratty-jeaned legs, we'll nod slowly and unsurely along with them. Because we're confused, too.

Early on, "indie" meant what punk meant, which was a willful operation outside the mainstream music industry, a fully do-it-yourself approach to everything about music. It wasn't about a specific sound at first, though with the limited elements prevalent in early punk bands—guitar, drums, bass, three to five white guys, technical proficiency optional—the music could only get so diverse. In England, the "indie" sound solidified much earlier than in the States; over here, it crystallized around the time punk broke in the late '80s and early '90s. The underground bands most visible to the mainstream almost all signed to majors sooner or later, and since they could no longer be defined by their label independence, they were defined by their generally similar sound: some imprecise amalgam of the Pixies' howling melodics, Sonic Youth's distortion, Pavement's shambling swagger and Nirvana's raw nerve. Meanwhile, back in the real indie dugout, bands formed that had little or nothing to do with the recently genrefied punk acts: riotgrrrls like Bikini Kill and Heavens to Betsy, lo-fi bedroom maestros like Elliott Smith and Cat Power, junk-drawer gypsies like Neutral Milk Hotel—they were all indie, too, right?

Well sure, why not? Who was indie to turn anyone away?

But then, like a well-meaning pet lover who takes in a few strays, indie suddenly found its house overrun with weird cats and smelling like piss.

"There's a part of me that can never shake the indignation that [indie] once was about ethics and business practices," Slim Moon says. "... There's a grumpy old man about me that's really upset that that's not what most people mean when they talk about indie anymore."

In 2006, CNN attempted to reign in the unwieldy concept with a web feature that proclaimed, "If it's cool, creative and different, it's indie." "That is a statement by a mediocre mass-media outlet with little clue about music," says writer Michael Azerrad, author of *Our Band Could Be Your Life*, the definitive history of the transitional period between punk and alternative rock. "Hip-hop artist Ghostface Killah answers that description. Does that mean he's indie, even though he's on Def Jam? Classical composer Osvaldo Golijov fits those criteria too. Is he indie as well? Or Lady Gaga or M.I.A.?"

It used to be easy to say what was indie and what was not. "The term 'indie' originally referred to labels which had no connection whatsoever to the major labels," Azerrad says. "That used to be a meaningful distinction, because the underground wanted nothing to do with corporate America. Obviously, things have changed." What's changed is this: In addition to direct relationships like Sub Pop's with Warner, most of the labels now widely considered to be "indie" powerhouses—like Domino, Merge and Matador—are distributed by the Alternative Distribution Alliance, majority-owned by Warner. This means that acts like Grizzly Bear, Dirty Projectors, St. Vincent, Spoon, Arcade Fire and others noted as the seminal "indie" acts of our time are not actually "indie" at all. (Even Clap Your Hands Say Yeah, the eponymous label founded by the band that became famous in 2005 for having no label, is distributed by the ADA.) Azerrad distinguishes these artists as part of a broader genre of "indie rock," defined as a "genre which takes as its antecedents the truly indie rock of preceding generations," he says. "It has nothing to do with the fiscal status of the label on which it is released. It should really be called 'indie-influenced rock.'" The designation "indie" he reserves for artists making music on labels that remain wholly independent.

These days, most people don't make that same distinction, perhaps because they don't share Azerrad's interest in semantics or his knowledge of history. From its earliest years, the word "indie" has been a badge of honor, something to distinguish between underground authenticity and mainstream pablum. Those once-oppositional forces have become ever more confused, which some might say is all the more reason to reclaim indie's true meaning. This would be easier if we all agreed with Azerrad's definition—or any definition—but we don't.

Given its "by the people, for the people" punk roots, indie's most relevant definition would seem to come from its fans, its most fervent believers. But take to the Internet—the homeless home of this decade's most important scene—and you'll find that any definition set forth has been swiftly and furiously countered. On leading playlist-sharing site Last.fm, the description for the 422-member group "Indie is not a Genre" proclaims, "indie music is not a genre or stlye [sic] of music, but a label affliliation [sic]." "Finally a group that understands," reads one of the 242 comments left on the message board. "you dumb fucks," another responds. "indie is now a genre, there is an 'indie' sound which you can apply to certain bands. it does not mean independent." (Of course, the commenter declines to specify what that sound might be.) "Yeah, it's like ... um ... everything you don't know what is it, it's indie," another advises.

So much for that.

Even the ostensibly indie music industry is divided. Perhaps the most stunning example of this came late last year, when former Sleater-Kinney guitarist/vocalist Carrie Brownstein asked dozens of industry types, from label owners to musicians to publicists, "What does 'indie' mean to you?" She published the results on her NPR Music blog, Monitor Mix, and the lack of consensus was astounding. The definitions invoked everything

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from sound to label affiliations to level of personal hygiene.

"It means music not known by or supported by the greater populous [sic], residing in its' [sic] own little niche or community, being music for music's sake," wrote Portland music scene stalwart Rachel Blumberg. "That is what it has always meant to me. And I think that still exists." But what, exactly, is "music for music's sake?" Is it just songs played with friends on a back porch, or does it change when you sign to even a tiny indie label, like Portland's own Hush or Jealous Butcher? And if music is made in that kind of environment, but then somehow—like Neutral Milk Hotel or Arcade Fire—happens to catch on with the greater populace, do we revoke its indieness? (A friend of mine actually does this, re-labeling artists tagged as "indie" in her iTunes library if they sign to a major label or "get bigger," upgrading them to "alternative.")

"It means a band who cultivated a fan base for at least one album before they had any kind of money or marketing behind them," wrote Tristan Aaron, media director of The Women's Media Center. So do we need to vet all bands claiming to be "indie," to ensure their debuts were wholly unmarketed and recorded in essential poverty? Is there someone in charge of that, or do we just do it ourselves? And again, if the band signs to a major after that first album, is the "indie" distinction dropped?

Carly Starr, head of international marketing at Sub Pop, replied more precisely. What does indie mean? "Nothing," she said.

That's more like it.

"For myself, it is kind of split between two different definitions," says Brownstein, who notes that she "wasn't surprised" by the inconclusiveness of her informal survey. "One is a shortcut for explaining to someone what music sounds like. I think most music fans would acknowledge that's a vague definition, but it's a quick way to let someone know—like if someone asks what something sounds like, you can go, 'Oh, they're sort of indie-sounding.' For most people that have been listening to music for a while, that's going to conjure up something. And then I think that I would also revert to more literal definition as well, to mean someone that's independently minded, or following a set of rules or a philosophy that separates them from corporate music culture."

Sleater-Kinney released its two earliest albums on Chainsaw Records and four more on Kill Rock Stars—both wholly unaffiliated with major labels, then and now. The band's final record, *The Woods*, was released by Sub Pop in 2005, but Brownstein considers it an indie release. "I think that the artistic and business decisions of the Matadors and the Sub Pops speak for themselves," she says. "I think of Sub Pop and Matador as indie labels, but I'm sure some people would maybe not."

Here's an update on the elephant parable: So we've got these blind men, right? And then we've got the elephant—which is, as established, a mutant elephant, bigger than any elephant has ever been before, with multiple screaming heads and all that. And we're pretty sure this thing is dead. And these poor blind men are being asked to grab and grope and pat it all over. They're bound to fail, of course. They're bound to give him all sorts of ridiculous descriptions. But what they don't know is that even if they *could* see the whole of this rotten pachyderm, they still wouldn't know what it was.

Pretty much all anyone agrees on, beside the fact that indie does exist in some form, is the issue of authenticity. Whatever indie is, whatever this weird elephant is, we know one thing: It's gotta be *real*. Or as the Sex Pistols famously sneered back in '77, they've gotta *mean it*, man.

IT'S GONE BIG

Why do we care what indie is? We care because some version of it is being thrown in our faces more and more every day, and in the strangest ways. And just like there's a spectrum of what we consider "indie" (in terms of artists' actual releases), there's a wide range of degrees to which indie is commodified and sold back to us. In some regards, this is nothing new. In 1993, writer Thomas Frank—during his tenure as editor of counterculture 'zine *The Baffler*—mourned the replacement of '80s glam-danger marketing with co-opted punk tropes to hawk cars and sodas. "With the 'alternative' face-lift, 'rebellion' continues to perform its traditional function of justifying the economy's ever-accelerating cycles of obsolescence with admirable efficiency," he seethed in his essay "Alternative to What?," penned at the height of punk's commercialization. "Since our willingness to load up our closets with purchases depends upon an eternal shifting of the products paraded before us, upon our being endlessly convinced that the new stuff is better than the old, we must be persuaded over and over again that the 'alternatives' are more valuable than the existing or the previous."

The way indie appears in mainstream advertising today is

quite different, in that there's more emphasis on the art itself than there has been with any previously co-opted subculture. In the '90s, ads mimed attitude and attire to sell products that would've hardly passed muster with members of the movement whose style was being ripped off, but the real punks could hardly control it—no one owns the copyright on a look. Today, ads are more likely to employ songs—or at least 15-second clips of them—that work as ever-so-brief soundtracks to a larger message, which is generally more subtle, less associated with a specific ideology and, thanks to the checks and balances of licensing, almost always approved by the artists themselves, whether they're on an indie, a major or something in between.

"All my life, I've heard people talk about issues of co-optation and underground and mainstream, and I even use that language myself sometimes," Slim Moon says. "But I can't quite think of it in those terms. I think it just isn't that simple or that nefarious."

Dawn Sutter Madell is the co-owner and music supervisor of Agoraphone Music Direction, a Brooklyn-based company that works with advertising agencies to place music in TV commercials. She was a music writer before she got into advertising; her husband, Josh, is also a musician and co-owner of New York's Other Music, arguably America's premier indie-record retailer. "I once licensed a super-obscure '60s band called The Monks and put them in a Powerade ad, and someone said to me—not knowing that I had done it—like, 'I can't believe they found that band!' And I was like, '*They* didn't find it,'" she says. "The closest you would come would be that the advertising company found it. It's not like the people at Coke are gonna come to you and say, 'We really wanna use The Monks in this Powerade ad.'"

Volkswagen's 2000 Cabrio commercial, featuring Nick Drake's "Pink Moon," is often cited as a watershed moment for underground music in advertising. Lance Jensen was part of the team of writers that plucked the song out of their personal libraries and placed it in the ad; he's since co-founded Boston ad agency Modernista. "Advertising is firmly in the crossroads of the unholy alliance of art and commerce," says Jensen (who describes his staff as "just a bunch of misfits, really"). "It just is."

"Personally, I don't mind it so much because it's been happening so long and I know the reality of it," says Brandon Stosuy, senior writer for music blog *Stereogum*, who pens the site's Quit Your Day Job column about musicians pulling paychecks from diners and record stores while not on tour. But he realizes it can be tough for fans to deal with the possibility of their favorite band's appearance in the mainstream, however limited. "Some people feel like it's their private thing," he says. "They see these blogs as secrets that no one knows about, so if something shows up on TV or the six o'clock news, they freak out." Stosuy knows because he's been there; back when Matador struck its deal with Atlantic, he and his friends were just a handful of the thousands of teenagers who agonized over whether Pavement was or was not indie anymore. (These days, he generally falls into the indie-as-sensibility camp.)

For those unsure even now of the practical worth of musicians licensing their songs for commercial use, the finest bit of apologetics on the subject is probably John Leland's 2001 *New York Times Magazine* piece about The Apples in Stereo licensing their song "Strawberryfire" for a Sony television commercial, which made it possible for the band's husband-and-wife frontman and drummer to buy furniture for their new baby. "You imagine that it's a crass process," Apples lead singer Robert Schneider told Leland at the time. "But it's not like Sony used our song in the commercial, which is how it looks to the indie kid. It's just one guy who liked our music."

Maybe that was true for "Strawberryfire"—it was a musician friend of Schneider's working in advertising who suggested the song for the spot—and it may often be true for the work Modernista and Agoraphone do, though Madell admits she can't speak for any other ad agency: "Not every company works like we do." But despite all intentions, what that indie kid—or what any one of us—sees in a TV commercial for a mega-corporation soundtracked by a popular song, indie or otherwise, isn't a mirage. Maybe we're too charmed by the serendipitous pleasure of hearing a song we love out in the wild, or we're too busy trying to push any and all unwanted associations from our minds—or maybe we just don't care. Still, the fact remains: It's a band making money from a company trying to make money off of us by using the band to imply that they—the company, the brand—share some values with the song, and if you like the song, or at least the way the song pairs with the images in the ad, then you'll like the company and what they make, which includes this big TV, which you will probably love as much as this song, if you love the song, so won't you please buy it?

"ALL MY LIFE, I'VE HEARD PEOPLE TALK ABOUT ISSUES OF CO-OPTATION AND UNDERGROUND AND MAINSTREAM, AND I EVEN USE THAT LANGUAGE MYSELF SOMETIMES," SLIM MOON SAYS. "BUT I CAN'T QUITE THINK OF IT IN THOSE TERMS. I THINK IT JUST ISN'T THAT SIMPLE OR THAT NEFARIOUS."

This is the approach of all modern advertising, no matter what label a band is on or whose baby needs a crib or who's working double-shifts at the coffee shop just to make ends meet when he's not on the road. Ad agencies aren't in the business of entertaining; these commercials aren't made just for funsies. You don't need to be Don Draper or even Thomas Frank to recognize this. Bob Seger sells strength, dependability and rugged nostalgia (perfect for Chevy); The Shins sell whimsy, sensitivity and an off-kilter hipness—perfect for... McDonald's?

What makes indie such an odd example of a subculture being sold back to the masses is that, in practice, its main selling point is its uncoolness. Its presence in an ad doesn't imply rebelliousness like alternative-culture tropes were once meant to; its songs and stars don't lend an air of dangerous sex appeal as did rock's earliest spokespeople. Instead, it's offered up as a different kind of different, something simple and

honest and true, a little weird, a little funny—rebellious, if anything, in its delightful ordinariness. In late 2007, *The Atlantic*'s Michael Hirschorn identified this "aesthetic principle" as "quirk," defining it as "an embrace of the odd against the blandly mainstream."

"It features mannered ingenuousness, an embrace of small moments, narrative randomness, situationally amusing but not hilarious character juxtapositions … and unexplainable but nonetheless charming character traits," he wrote. "Quirk takes not mattering very seriously." He then doled out a cross-platform cut down of pop culture's then-current pantheon of quirk: *This American Life*, *Napoleon Dynamite*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, *Flight of the Conchords*. He missed *Juno* by just a few months, but the movie likely would have altered his take dramatically; as it was, his thesis was supported by taking shot after gleeful shot at *This American Life*'s "self-styledly quirky" host Ira Glass, lamenting the radio show's climate as "a kind of permanent 70 degrees, moderate humidity."

Imagine if he'd had as fodder Diablo Cody's stripper-to-screenwriter story, Ellen Page's eerily natural portrayal of *Juno*'s hyper-offbeat title character, the movie's stringently precocious and best-selling soundtrack (featuring Belle and Sebastian, Kimya Dawson and proto-indie rockers The Velvet Underground), and the film's predictably unexpected Oscar nods. And that's to say nothing of the deluge of quirk that's flowed forth since: all of Michael Cera's other movies, *Where the Wild Things Are*, Zooey Deschanel. It would've been an embarrassment of twitches.

Few doubted the honesty of *Juno*'s weirdness, and Hirschorn himself didn't necessarily take issue with the authenticity of quirk, just its ubiquity—but it would have been easy. In early 2009, Comcast rolled out a clearly *Juno*-inspired marketing campaign called "Dream Big," the commercials for which were part *Sims* and part *Sesame Street*, featuring hiply (or square-hiply) dressed actors all singing about the joys of hi-speed Internet in a hushed monotone jingle that sounded like The Moldy Peaches on quaaludes. There was also a hat-wearing, guitar-playing squirrel, and a social networking site, "Comcast Town." It was, as Hirschorn once deadpanned, "Random." Then came Miracle Whip's "We Will Not Tone It Down" ads, in which a scruffy guitar-based song played over footage of a hyper-diverse array of attractive co-eds laughing, running around, playing with kids and eating sandwiches oozing with gooey-white goodness. "We're not like the others," the voiceover intones. "We won't ever try to be." Well, thank God! Except, didn't they see the Hellmann's "It's Time For Real" commercial that ran in the summer of 2007? You know, the one where the jaunty piano-based song plays over footage of a hyper-diverse array of attractive co-eds laughing, running around, playing with kids and eating sandwiches oozing with gooey-white goodness?

This aesthetic might shock our time-traveling punk forefathers most of all. How did indie go from the scalding, thrashing fury of bands like Minor Threat and Black Flag to toy pianos, ukuleles and polite handclaps—to selling *mayonnaise*, apparently the patron condiment of youthful rebellion?

Frank and his *Baffler* screed have already done well to answer the mayo conundrum. Perhaps, like the "greenwashing" that's spread in the wake of the eco-chic movement, we'll dub this "indiewashing." Still, we're left wondering how this particular sensibility (the fey instrumentation, the aw-shucks cutesiness and all that goddamn hand-lettering) has become broadly synonymous with "indie." Apparently, this is just what happens when you tell anyone they can make music—screw the mainstream, screw the man, screw labels, screw lessons, screw context—and then give them the thrift-store instruments, a bootleg copy of Pro Tools and the MySpace page with which to do it. The democratization of technology and ever-increasing Internet access have done a thousand wonderful things for the music industry, making it easier than ever for more people to find more music, and easier for artists (new and old) to be heard. The Web has usurped power from major labels (maybe more so than it would have if it struck a decade earlier, when majors weren't in such violent flux), but in many cases, it has also removed a crucial filtering element—all those local fans or fellow artists or booking agents or studio folks an artist would have had to impress before getting any kind of break. The last decade has seen a huge boom in already-excellent local scenes—Austin, Portland, Brooklyn, Chapel Hill, Omaha—but for every act like TV on the Radio that was ready for its national debut thanks to the galvanizing challenges of making it in its hometown, there's a Clap Your Hands Say Yeah that's quite clearly, and rather painfully, hashing out its musical identity in public.

The increasing premium on ordinariness and amateurism that makes this all OK isn't just limited to indie. Across the board, we're seeing more credit given to citizen journalism, crowd-sourcing and ever-more-inscrutable "grassroots" efforts. Since its founding in 2005, the website Etsy.com

HOW DID INDIE GO FROM THE SCALDING, THRASHING FURY OF BANDS LIKE MINOR THREAT AND BLACK FLAG TO TOY PIANOS, UKULELES AND POLITE HANDCLAPS—TO SELLING *MAYONNAISE*, APPARENTLY THE PATRON CONDIMENT OF YOUTHFUL REBELLION?

"IN ERAS PAST, MAINSTREAM CULTURE WAS BLANDLY, BLINDLY COMPLACENT, SO UNDERGROUND MUSIC WAS ANGRY AND DISSATISFIED," AZERRAD SAYS. "BUT NOW, MAINSTREAM CULTURE ISN'T COMPLACENT, IT'S STUPID AND ANGRY; UNDERGROUND CULTURE REACTS BY BECOMING SMARTER, MORE SERENE. THAT'S NOT WIMPY—IT'S POWERFUL AND PRODUCTIVE."

has become a hub of commerce for independent artists and crafters, and while there are millions of beautifully wrought items for sale, there's an equal number of creations that should've never left the craft room. (In a pretty meta-D.I.Y. move, *Regretsy*—a blog founded to chronicle the most baffling Etsy listings—has become one of an increasing number of blogs to score a book deal based on its online popularity.) And, as many have theorized, there's a very special sense of entitlement among this generation known as "millennials"—kids that grew up in the flush 1990s, when business was good and everyone's parents told them they could be whatever they dreamed of, but, like, whatever, you don't have to believe that if you don't want to. In all cases, just because you can do something—or *want* to do something, or were once told you *could* do something—doesn't mean you should. But as a musical movement founded on sheer hopelessness and utter lack of popular appeal, one that relished the freedom to be unruly, untrained and unconcerned, that's a tough stance for indie to take.

"It's all so independent," filmmaker Jim Jarmusch lamented to *The Guardian*'s Lynn Hirschberg in 2005. "I'm so sick of that word. I reach for my revolver when I hear the word quirky. Or edgy. Those words are now becoming labels that are slapped on products to sell them. Anyone who makes a film that is the film they want to make, and it is not defined by marketing analysis or a commercial enterprise, is independent. My movies are kind of made by hand. They're not polished—they're sort of built in the garage. It's more like being an artisan in some way."

Remember, this is the guy behind *Night on Earth*, *Ghost Dog* and *Coffee and Cigarettes*. The guy credited with sparking the independent-film movement in America. The guy who seems quirky enough that if he *did* shoot anyone for calling him that, it would only reaffirm that person's word choice. In this day and age, Jarmusch's movies getting slapped with the "independent" label (which they truly deserve—he makes them all without a studio, then shops them around later) could only help him, could only drive people to his work. But if even he's no longer buying it, why should we?

MILK THAT SOUND

At indie-rock scout meetings, few traits earn more merit badges than "authenticity." Whatever is meant by "independent" or "quirky" and all of these code words, there's an expectation of some level of organic craft—real art made by real people, not manufactured and mass-produced.

Of course, there's no quantitative gauge, no canary to lower into the mine to check for noxious fumes of fakery. It seems weird to go around eyeing every new band like they're the indie *NSYNC, but a little honest self-policing probably wouldn't hurt. Sometimes it's an easy call—Brandon Flowers donning bulky shoulder pads made of animal pelts and feathers for The Killers' most recent album cycle was as clear a grab for weirdo-cred as we've seen in a while, especially given the band's tepid paean "Glamorous Indie Rock and Roll," which takes on the same subculture as Sebadoh's infamous "Gimme Indie Rock" without any of the sly self-deprecation, undercurrent of subverted loathing or, uh, involvement in the scene in any way. But usually authenticity is an imprecise, continual assessment, prone to personal bias and human error—not exactly something to build a whole musical movement upon.

Indie never seems more insular than when it complains about its own sound. Some unconventional artists have cruised into the indie world not because of their D.I.Y. acumen or ability to channel Stephen Malkmus, but because of the pure power of their realness. But for every LCD Soundsystem or M.I.A. there are 50 other legit artists left prowling at the gates. If authenticity is the key to the indie kingdom, then those gates need to open up and indie needs to recognize the validity—indeed, the kinship—of like-minded artists from other realms. Lyle Lovett lives on an honest-to-God ranch in Texas, and is about as authentic as they come. So maybe now he's indie. Gucci Mane raps about crime, and at press time is locked up in Fulton County Jail—what could be more authentic? Ghostface is a singular talent, as true to his own crazy muse as any guitar slinger. Michael Azerrad would disagree, but for those who equate "indie" with authentic artistry, perhaps Ghost makes the cut, too. Sure, these artists are all on labels owned by majors—but that's hardly pushed Death Cab or No Age from the fold.

Current indie orthodoxy rarely embraces artists this far out of bounds, but in some respects it's more diverse than it's ever been. "I think the people making music today, in general, are far more open-minded, more adept at synthesizing influences," says Lou Barlow, who co-wrote Sebadoh's jabbing ode at the early-'90s indie scene. "At the time we did 'Gimme Indie Rock,' it seemed like our peers were still in a post-hardcore macho rut. We were chastised for making acoustic music and singing softly—no one seemed particularly ready for anything 'sensitive.' That's obviously changed. If I was protesting anything back then, it was the narrow-mindedness I heard in most independent music."

"EVERYONE IS OUT THERE SEARCHING FOR THE NEXT BIG THING, BUT IT'LL NEVER BE THE NEXT BIG THING ON THE SCALE NIRVANA WAS," STOUSUY SAYS. "IT'S WAVVES, WHICH IS A LITTLE DEPRESSING IN CONTEXT."

Now, though, things have swung to the opposite end of the spectrum. Azerrad sees a recent shift toward "more sophisticated indie rock"—led by artists like Animal Collective, Deerhoof and Joanna Newsom—as a rather punk reaction to mainstream America. "To insist that underground music be snarly and abrasive is to subscribe to a hidebound cliché, which is ironic since the whole idea of the music is to dispense with hidebound clichés," he says. "Underground music stands against and apart from mainstream culture in order to offer an antidote to it. In eras past, mainstream culture was blandly, blindly complacent, so underground music was angry and dissatisfied. [...] But now, mainstream culture isn't complacent, it's stupid and angry; underground culture reacts by becoming smarter, more serene. That's not wimpy—it's powerful and productive."

Still, there are growing complaints that indie has gone "too soft" or "too comfortable," which of course is nothing new—it sounds a lot like early punk's complaints about the new rock of the '70s mainstream (which included not just ABBA but also Fleetwood Mac and Paul Simon, now considered artful, seminal acts). And the the complaint does seem salient right now. Indie's prevailing sound has shifted away from noisy rock and toward lush symphonics, a more studied pace and more emphasis on lyrics and emotional ambience—Sufjan Stevens, Feist, Iron & Wine, Bon Iver. Wrote Carrie Brownstein on her Monitor Mix blog in late 2009: "Though I enjoyed many a song by all of [these] artists, the terms I'd use to describe their music are ones I wouldn't wish on my enemies: pleasant and nice."

In a world where a car commercial or Target ad could feasibly "break" a band, it's fair to be somewhat suspicious of palatability, which can be just as easily feigned as the sound of a calculated chart hit, especially when certain tastemaking pockets begin to establish their preferred sound—like the unknown, just-barely-off-kilter singer/songwriters picked to soundtrack the earliest seasons of *Grey's Anatomy*, or the sassy, exuberant kitchen-sink pop recently favored by Apple to sell its iPods and iPhones. This kind of artist-driven calculation might be even more dangerous than the mainstream calculation we're used to. At least mainstream pop is generally marketed and approached under the default assumption that it's dross, with any arguments for "authenticity" hashed out only after the fact—and in that way it's more artistically honest than most modern indie music.

The indie world certainly isn't above kowtowing to trends, especially when those trends are of its own design. Thanks to the speed at which songs now proliferate, what happened in the '90s with grunge and alternative is happening again, but on an evermore genre-fragmented scale. This isn't like the early indie bands of the '80s all coming up and claiming The Velvet Underground as a major influence. It's not even like Gavin Rossdale's terrible band Bush making a sweet buck in post-grunge America by sounding like a poor man's Nirvana. Instead, it's Wavves dropping its first single and then, less than six months later, Neon Indian being not only hailed as the next Wavves, but also as the torchbearer of a whole new genre—chillwave. (Of course, this stuff moves so fast that, by the time anyone reads these words, "chillwave" probably will be just about as relevant as polka, having since been replaced by the next brief thing, perhaps "frostycore," coming soon to a Wendy's ad near you).

Over the last three decades, indie has built itself a subculture that is just as dependent on trends, superficiality and the whims and caprices of the listening public as the pop mainstream has ever been. It's generally less egalitarian toward female and minority performers than the mainstream. And even within its most narrowly defined bounds, indie is susceptible to its own ravenous appetite for the next big thing. The goal used to be generating some amount of buzz as a means to an end—a record deal, a decent-sized tour. The lightspeed Internet has made buzz an end unto itself, a seal of approval that one hand slaps on these acts while the other pushes them out the back door. This, of course, only reinforces the most widely held negative stereotype about indie rock—its cooler-than-thou elitism.

"Everyone is out there searching for the next big thing, but it'll never be the next big thing on the scale Nirvana was," Stosuy says. "It's Wavves, which is a little depressing in context."

In that iconic *Time* essay, Elson quoted 19th-century theologian Søren Kierkegaard, who once wrote, "The day when Christianity and the world become friends, Christianity is done away with." Indie has always been ragged on for its tendency—both actual and perceived—to cloister itself, to shun the mainstream, not just because of the commercial complications but in the interest of remaining willfully obscure as a point of pride. But given indie's increasing visibility over the last 10 years, this accusation now rings increasingly false. Maybe if it were more true, we wouldn't have found ourselves with this dead elephant on our hands.

SINK THIS POSEUR'S SOUL

So what do we do now that the one common factor in anyone's definition of "indie," the one thing about indie we thought we could ever rely on—its authenticity, its unsullied artistry—has been indicted?

Some have suggested that we throw out "indie" and come up with some new, less-loaded, more accurate term to describe the strange landscape that has grown up around us. "Post-indie" almost does the job, signifying, at least, that we're moving past something—though we're still not sure what that something might be. Perhaps a campaign could be launched to educate fans on the distinction, a la Azerrad, between "indie" and "indie rock"—though it'll be tough to strip indie cred from labels and artists who believe they've truly earned it, and in many ways have. In 2008, *Idolator* blogger

(and *Paste* contributor) Michaelangelo Matos suggested we trade "indie" for our old friend "alternative," writing, "So embrace your real heritage, kids. After all, if the most clueless of the current crop of downloaders-without-portfolio are any indication, the next group (which will likely have heard even more and have even less of a context to discuss it in) really won't know the difference anyway, for all the semantical gatekeeping in the world."

This points to an issue even larger than word choice—indie's increasing historylessness. As more fans are folded into the ranks every day, as more music is made and as time lumbers ever onward, indie's present becomes all the more unwieldy and its past all the more distant and obscure. "It is marketed as lifestyle, but the lifestyle isn't that different than [that of] the frat boy I wanted to avoid at that age," Stosuy says, recalling his earliest interest in indie. "It's listening to the music but not really caring about anything outside the music. It's not in the context of a scene. It's more about knowing the group and getting the leak before everyone else and arguing about who's best."

Music may be increasingly democratized, but a 30-year-old stay-at-home dad or a 57-year-old big city lawyer or a 43-year-old college professor are all still going to approach music and its context differently than a dyed-in-the-wool '70s punk fan, or an Animal Collective-obsessed bloghead of the '00s. And then of course we have the ever-booming population of American teenagers, which each year foists upon us a new crop of would-be rebels on our hands. These kids are no different from the kids of the '80s and '90s in that they want something new and different and dangerous, not necessarily because the TV told them they want it, but because of the insatiable teenage need to carefully, specifically delineate a personality in a big, scary world—to stand out from one crowd but still fit in within some smaller world defined by clothes and style and mood.

These kids—and these adults—may or may not know what punk is or once was. They may think SST is a vaccination or a test you take to get into college. They could learn, of course, through the unofficial punk civics course so many have taken before—scouring record stores, stuffing ears full of noise or, hell, these days, just reading Wikipedia. But if indie's going to whine about a lack of context, it should remember this: For as much as the late '70s and '80s are seen as the Garden of Eden for independent music, where it was first carefully rendered and ultimately defiled, punk was hardly the first to fight that particular incarnation of The Man.

When labels like Homestead and Touch and Go and SST were formed, they offered outlets for creative support and funding and provided direct alternatives to big labels like Capitol and Reprise, connecting a strange circle. Capitol Records itself had been co-founded by singer/composer Johnny Mercer in 1942 as an alternative to the majors—gramophone-company-subsidiaries (EMI and Decca) established to sell products to be played on their products or music-publishing arms of major film studios (Warner and Universal) founded to keep a hand in the pocket of actors-turned-recording stars. After EMI began its slow takeover of Capitol in the '50s, the label's mega-star Frank Sinatra left for Verve, which had been briefly independent before being subsumed by MGM, and in 1960 Ol' Blue Eyes broke off on his own to form Reprise, which operated independently for a few years before being bought by Warner. And on and on: Smaller independent labels like Sun, Stax and Sire either folded or were eventually subsumed by a major, setting a precedent for our modern indies.

Take the *really* longview and you'll recall that Mozart established himself as not only one of Western civilization's first teen idols but also one of its first independent-music powerhouses, working outside the patronage of the Austrian courts and premiering some of his most important works at a suburban theater back in the hale 1780s—not in the courtesans' Italian but in German, the peoples' language. The young Amadeus knew what so many others would also realize in time: Sometimes, to do something right, you've gotta do it yourself.

In 1977, Shaun Cassidy topped the *Billboard* charts with "That's Rock 'n' Roll," a song in which he sang about screaming his heart out and buying new guitars, a song that involved zero screaming and more sax than axe. It was a world where rock 'n' roll had become little more than thinly veiled tokenism, less an idea and more a word used to sell records by a child star (whose older half-brother had, a few years earlier, starred in the similarly-unintended music-industry meta-parody *The Partridge Family*). It was in this world that punk began to break through, declaring rock dead and carving its own space for what was to come. This thing we call "indie" now finds itself at a frighteningly similar juncture.

To borrow another sentiment from Nietzsche, is this not modern music's own eternal recurrence? In *The Gay Science*, from which his "God is dead" notion also comes, Nietzsche writes, "What if some day or night a demon were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!' Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: 'You are a god, and never have I heard anything more divine.'"

Indie is dead. What's next? *Tim*

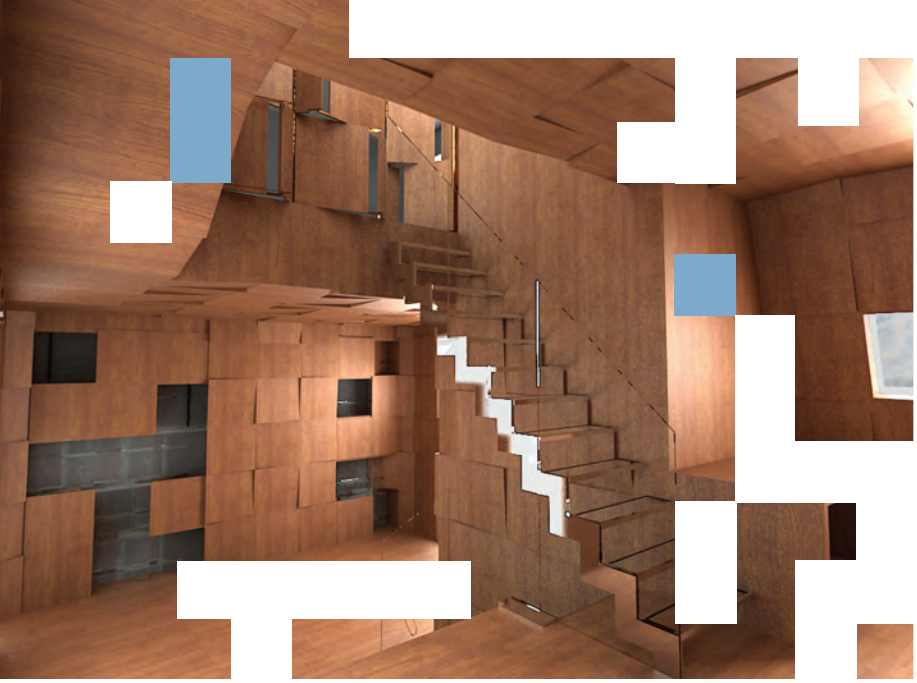
THE HOUSE

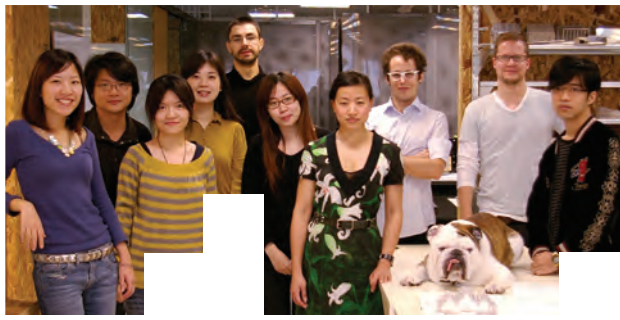
BY SHANNON WERLE

Nestled along the fringe of northern Taipei, a city of 2.6 million people cradled in a basin on the tip of Taiwan, is a peculiar structure punctuated by patchwork windows set into concrete with the whim of a jazz solo. The five-story tower sits just a block from the metro station, amidst a rambling array of apartment blocks, an elementary school and a pastiche of shops, but you'll have to crane your neck to catch a glimpse of the building, which is framed by nondescript neighbors in the pocket of a residential alley. The exterior hints at the sonic splendor inside—it's an inhabitable music box with the power to tune the sounds of a private dwelling.

The cost: $900,000. The clients: former symphony conductor Chiu Chun-chiang and his wife, Wanchen Hsieh, an award-winning oboist. The architects: another married couple, Grace Cheung and Royce YC Hong, co-founders of Taipei-based architecture office XRANGE, which has a history of unusual design. The firm's 2006 Ant Farm House, an interwoven network of narrow living spaces wrapped around an indigenous stone house in the manner of an underground ant colony, received a coveted glossy spread in *Phaidon Atlas of 21st Century World Architecture*, an industry Bible. Cheung and Hong's newest house is defined largely by its wooden Music Box, a "reverberation chamber" that dominates the tower like a wedding-cake centerpiece, allowing residents to tune the sounds floating through their home.

"The idea is of putting a performance hall—like an auditorium space—inside of the house," Cheung explains. A swarm of 375 walnut modules, wrapping the walls and sprouting out of the ceiling, protrude at slightly different angles in order to prevent direct echoing. Particular panels can be pushed, pulled or pounded shut with louvers, as if an elaborate off-switch. Although the architects intended to construct the Music Box out of ebony, the ink-black wood usu-





➥ Grace Cheung (green dress) and the XRANGE team.

"I'M ALWAYS INTERESTED IN HOW SPACES FLOW INTO A BUILDING, AND CREATING FLOW OF FORM. SO INSTEAD OF SUPPRESSING THE SOUND I WANTED TO FIND A WAY TO MOVE IT AROUND THE HOUSE."

ally restricted to smaller portions such as the accidental keys on a piano, walnut proved more feasible and a better fit for the budget. Centralized on the third story, the Music Box—where music is created, and sounds throughout the house are channeled and "tuned" by louvers—flows as a vertical link throughout the tower, eventually spilling over into stadium-style seating for impromptu gatherings and formal recitals alike.

Although the designers were tied to the two young musicians by family friends, they weren't introduced until the musicians moved back to Taipei three years ago after spending more than a decade abroad, initially as students in Germany and later developing their careers throughout Europe.

"When they came to us," Cheung says, "I thought, obviously, music is a really important element in their lives. I can imagine how, in their daily lives, they will talk about music—like every second of the day. My husband and I talk about design all of the time, not necessarily about work, but it just comes out in the conversation."

After a visit to XRANGE headquarters, the design process for the house began in 2006. Chun-chiang and Hsieh already had a location for the project, a 1,600 square-foot urban plot handed down to the conductor following his mother's death. It had been the site of a former family home, and the couple had a deep, sentimental attachment to it. "We wanted this to be a very unique house," Chun-chiang and Hsieh wrote in a recent email, translated from Chinese. "The architecture will tell our story—a story that connects our past, our work, our hobbies, our family and our future."

Fitting that story—and a house—onto the modest urban lot was another challenge. "It's so incredibly small that it's a bit like one of those little Japanese houses," Cheung says. "In order to maximize all of the square footage that we can build on that site, the house took the form of a five-story tower with five floors and a cellar." Each floor is essentially its own room: The cellar is located below the first floor bedroom/multipurpose space. The third floor is dedicated to the Music Box core, which is sandwiched between combined living, dining and kitchen quarters on the second floor and a master bedroom on the fourth. A roof terrace and Buddhist shrine caps the additional fifth-floor bedroom.

The musicians' two Steinway pianos, which combine to weigh a half-ton, are already factored into the structural calculations. (Design team member Dema Chang says the pianos will be added halfway through construction, then built around—it's the only way they'd fit.) The finished house, according to the clients, "will be a place of free interaction, where one can enjoy music and wine in any corner of the house, sitting or lying down." They mean it about the wine—their cellar currently holds more than 500 bottles. Their new wine cellar, designed in a bold shade of purple, assures storage for an additional thousand. "We started with the idea of a cup of wine," Chang says, "so the shape of the cellar is like the form of wine moving in the glasses."

Construction on the House of Music began in June 2009; it's slated for completion in December 2010. At this point, though, the architects agree that most major hurdles have been crossed. Anxieties peaked before a Feng Shui master was invited to inspect the design, as is customary practice in Taiwan. Qi (roughly pronounced 'chee')—a positive or negative energy—plays a central role in the ancient Chinese art of Feng Shui, along with the strategic placement of traditional Chinese elements such as the dragon, a symbol of prosperity. "I thought that the Qi of the music would be very good for the house," Cheung says. "I'm always interested in how spaces flow into a building, and creating flow of form. So instead of suppressing the sound I wanted to find a way to move it around the house." As it turns out, inhabitable music boxes are particularly suited for transporting positive energies. "The Music Box punches through the bedrooms and ends on the skylights, and the master believed that particular space is where the dragon could stay," explains Cheung.

"Saved," she adds, "by a Feng Shui master." *Tim S.*

Images courtesy of XRANGE

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FROM AUTHOR KURT VONNEGUT

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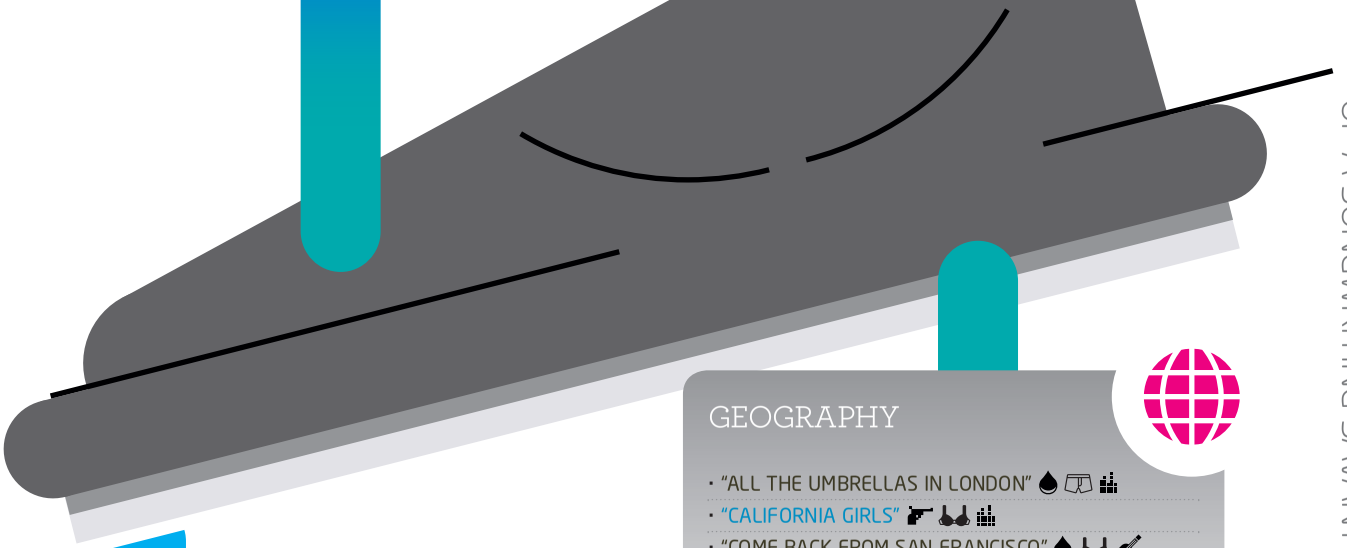
ON THE OCCASION OF *REALISM*, THE NEW MAGNETIC FIELDS ALBUM, WE GO INSIDE THE MIND OF A SONGWRITING SAVANT



ANIMALS

- "100,000 FIREFLIES"
- "ABSOLUTELY CUCKOO"
- "BOA CONSTRICTOR"
- "FIDO, YOUR LEASH IS TOO LONG"
- "LET'S PRETEND WE'RE BUNNY RABBITS"
- "ZEBRA"

GEOGRAPHY

- "ALL THE UMBRELLAS IN LONDON"
- "CALIFORNIA GIRLS"
- "COME BACK FROM SAN FRANCISCO"
- "GRAND CANYON"
- "LONG VERMONT ROADS"
- "LOVE GOES HOME TO PARIS IN THE SPRING"
- "THE LUCKIEST GUY ON THE LOWER EAST SIDE"
- "RENO DAKOTA"
- "WASHINGTON, D.C."

BOSSING PEOPLE AROUND

- "DON'T LOOK AWAY"
- "KISS ME LIKE YOU MEAN IT"
- "PLEASE STOP DANCING"
- "SAVE A SECRET FOR THE MOON"
- "TAKE ECSTASY WITH ME"

BREAKUPS

- "ALWAYS ALREADY GONE"
- "I DON'T REALLY LOVE YOU ANYMORE"
- "I THINK I NEED A NEW HEART"
- "THE NIGHT YOU CAN'T REMEMBER"
- "PAPA WAS A RODEO"
- "SEDUCED AND ABANDONED"
- "YEAH! OH, YEAH!"

KEY

EMOTIONAL STATE

- SUICIDAL
- VENGEFUL
- MOURNFUL
- WISTFUL
- OTHER

PREDOMINANT GENDER IN VOCALS

- BOY
- GIRL

SONIC APPROACH

- ACOUSTIC
- WALL OF SOUND

DANCING

- "THE DADA POLKA"
- "DANCING IN YOUR EYES"
- "NOTHING MATTERS WHEN WE'RE DANCING"
- "WE ARE HAVING A HOOTENANNY"
- "WITH WHOM TO DANCE?"

DEATH

- "A CHICKEN WITH ITS HEAD CUT OFF"
- "THE DEATH OF FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE"
- "EPITAPH FOR MY HEART"
- "FROM A SINKING BOAT"
- "I DIE"
- "I SHATTER"
- "SUDDENLY THERE IS A TIDAL WAVE"

BY MICHAEL SABA | ILLUSTRATION BY KERRY MEYER

WII ARE THE CHAMPIONS

SENIORS ARE REBORN AS ATHLETES THROUGH VIDEO-GAME BOWLING TOURNAMENT

WILLA MAE GRAHAM GRIPS THE WII CONTROLLER AT HER SIDE, COOLLY EYEING THE BOWLING LANE ON THE LCD SCREEN IN FRONT OF HER. "COME ON, NOW," SHE SAYS AS SHE WAVES THE REMOTE IN A FORWARD ARC. HER VIRTUAL AVATAR SWINGS AND RELEASES ITS BALL IN TANDEM, AND A CAMERA FOLLOWS IT TO THE END OF THE LANE WHERE IT DEMOLISHES ALL 10 PINS. "NICE STRIKE!" THE GAME'S ROBOTIC ANNOUNCER CHIRPS. GRAHAM TURNS AROUND, CRACKS A SMILE AND WALKS BACK TO HER TEAM TO HAND THE CONTROLLER TO THE NEXT BOWLER.

At 81 years old, Graham—a former church-league bowling champ—has, in her own way, stepped out of retirement. Her Wii bowling chops have earned her the captainship of the Langston-Brown Senior Center's LB-1 team in Arlington, Va. Today, her team is competing in the National Senior League's inaugural Wii bowling tournament, a nationwide contest between senior-center squads for the "National Wii Bowl" championship. This first season is a test-run; organizers hope the tournament will eventually involve whole communities, akin to other intramural sports.

High expectations, but not unrealistic. The NSL's tournament has quite literally changed some players' lives, offering them a new way to enjoy the dizzying highs and lows of competition, forge friendships and discover unexpected reserves of spirit.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

It's a sunny, bracingly cold day in the suburbs of Northern Virginia. In the Langston-Brown multipurpose room, seniors gather under fluorescent lights to play dominos and assemble puzzles while "The Cha Cha Slide" pulses on a boombox. The center's two Wii bowling teams are assembled in one corner of the room, donning tie-dyed team shirts before they play. "For luck," explains Margaret Richardson, captain of Langston-Brown's LB-2 team.

They can't see their opponents, the Clark-Lindsey Village Guttergals from Urbana, Ill. (the scores are posted online after each game to determine who wins), but the competitive tension is still palpable. And yet Willa Graham's serene demeanor never changes; in her church-league days, back in high school, she took home trophies, scoring as high as 290 one game. Her best Wii score is only slightly less impressive: 246.

The bowlers' pre-game confab carries an air of warmth and mutual respect. Center director Eva Cano-Mayor thrills at how the game has inspired such camaraderie: "Wii bowling is definitely the most popular here, and I believe it's because everyone is moving around a lot more and, most importantly, having more fun." Cano-Mayor was born in Peru and speaks with a thick accent, but her voice has a forceful clarity and conviction when discussing the benefits of Wii bowling. "The spirit of friendly competition—it's great," she says. "Even the seniors who never play watch and cheer along. I would definitely say that everyone here has become a lot closer since they started."

Richardson shares that sentiment. "Young people do things. It's the seniors who sit around and do nothing. If we've got something that can get us up and moving around, and get us together, well, let's do it," she says with a laugh. "My grandkids still won't play me though, I think they're a little scared that their grandma would win."

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

The National Senior League's very existence is testament to the Wii's incredible success. Since the console's release in September 2007, Nintendo has sold more than 20 million Wiis in the U.S. and 50 million worldwide, far surpassing sales of Sony and Microsoft's competing video-game systems. The Wii's budget-friendly price and motion-sensitive control scheme have made Nintendo's brand synonymous with a new generation of casual gamers, erasing the decades-long borderlines of age and gender that made gaming the stigmatized hobby of teenaged basement-dwellers and twentysomething men with too much free time. Gaming may be a wildly lucrative industry, but only very recently has the video-games-as-art argument been taken seriously.

The paradigm shift was long overdue. Steven Johnson's 2005 book of low-culture apologetics, *Everything Bad is Good*

"WHEN I BOWLED IN A LEAGUE I AVERAGED ABOUT 260. BUT I HAD TWO OPEN-HEART SURGERIES, CAROTID SURGERIES, BACK PROBLEMS AND MARITAL PROBLEMS. I CAN'T DO REAL BOWLING ANY MORE, BUT WITH THIS I STILL FEEL LIKE A CHAMPION."

for You, makes a neuroscientific argument that the strawman of gaming as a mind-numbing waste of time is undeserved; video games actually enhance the brain's cognitive functions. Dennis Berkholtz, the founder of the NSL, champions Wii bowling for the very same reasons.

The inspiration for a nationwide video-game tournament for seniors came to Berkholtz after a visit to his parents' retirement community in Cape Coral, Fla. "It bothered me that there weren't any programs to engage the senior residents, programs that encouraged what I'd call a good community or active minds," he says. "A year later, I played Wii bowling for the first time. A light immediately went on in my head: This is the perfect game to keep them sharp! So I worked out a business plan, and I discovered that many senior communities were already playing Wii sports. All I had to do was bring them together with a national championship."

Berkholtz, 64, played handball for the U.S. team in the 1972 Summer Olympics, and he swears by the merits of organized competition as a panacea for the many ailments and illnesses that accompany aging. "It's a fun way to keep them physically and mentally engaged, which is so important when you get older." His steely voice trips for a split-second: "That's why I started this, to help raise money for Alzheimer's, as a way of honoring my father who died with dementia."

Berkholtz quit his job last June to manage the NSL full time. Encouraged by the positive response to last fall's trial season (which boasted more than 186 teams from 24 states), he's already planning to expand the program to include a webcam league, and possibly a multi-sport Wii Olympics to coincide with September's international Active Aging Week. "Right now, we're also looking at expanding into public housing, which traditionally has big senior communities, and also into the Veteran's hospital system," he says. "After that? International!"

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Rusted-over bridges and abandoned factories line the approach to Charleroi, a sleepy exurb on the banks of the Monongahela River in the hills south of Pittsburgh. A sign on the outskirts of town featuring hollow-eyed businessmen informs you that you're entering "The Magic City." There's a peculiar homogeneity to the vast stretches of farmland and post-industrial towns in Pennsylvania that makes Bruce Springsteen seem like America's most accurate regional historian.

The NSL's championship game is going down at the Riverside Place senior center across the railroad tracks from the town's main drag. Riverside Silver will play two games against the SAS Strikers of Boca Raton, with victory going to the team with the highest point aggregate. The players can watch their rivals on a TV hooked up to Skype, giving the competition all the drama and immediacy of live sports.

Bedecked in black-and-white bowling shirts emblazoned with "Wii are Riverside Silver," the competitors are stationed in front of two TVs, right next to a pair of unplugged *Dance Dance Revolution* pads that are used in the center's "DanceTown" program. Kathy Cochran, a wheelchair-bound bowler, maneuvers over to the playing area and grins.

Her teammate Larry Maraldo, a former Pittsburgh police officer and weightlifter, crosses his arms over his barrel chest and peers at the screens from underneath bushy eyebrows: "We were seeded 16th and came up from the very bottom. Talk about your dark horses."

They edge out the SAS Strikers by 26 pins in the first round, thanks largely to a perfect 300 from Maraldo, each strike bringing thunderous cheers from the dozens of onlookers. "I'm still alright," he deadpans after his final throw. "I bowl perfect games in Wii all the time," he explains as they ready for the second of two games. "When I bowled in a league I averaged about 260. But I had two open-heart surgeries, carotid surgeries, back problems and marital problems. I can't do real bowling any more, but with this I still feel like a champion."

Despite another perfect game from Maraldo, Riverside falls 46 pins short in the second match, losing the championship to Boca Raton by just 20 pins. And though the bowlers are in mild disbelief about the loss at first, a sense of pride quickly replaces their disappointment. "This is a wonderful thing," Maraldo says. "It brings us together, and it brings good friendships. This isn't just a video game, it's something better." Cochran, silent for most of the postgame, suddenly speaks up: "I like to think I'm not afraid of anything, but I'd probably be scared if I tried to bowl in real life. I'm legally blind and in a wheelchair. This lets me do something I've never been able to do."

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Though they're hundreds of miles away in Arlington, the Langston-Brown bowlers are treading the same emotional ground as Riverside Silver. Both Langston-Brown teams made it to the playoffs and were defeated in close games. And maybe it's a certain perspective that only comes with age and experience, but they don't really care about victories and losses, point and rankings.

"It was never about winning," Graham says as she prepares for a postseason exhibition match between LB-1 and LB-2. "It was about us. We wanted to do better, so we came together as a team. And by doing that, we *were* better, whether or not we won. That's something special. There's a real value and dignity to that." *Fin*

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THE MAJOR TOUGHS

Spoon strips down—a little—on seventh album

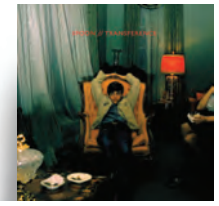
BY STEPHEN M. DEUSNER

SPOON
Transference MERGE

How do you follow an album like *Ga Ga Ga Ga Ga*? Released in 2007, Spoon's sixth full-length was both its most challenging and successful album to date. The Austin band indulged its every studio whim and bolstered its antsy sound with fuller percussion and Memphis-style horns. Songs like "The Ghost of You Lingers" and "Eddie's Ragga" were discursive experiments, and even the catchiest tunes had subdued hooks. The album was a slow burner that sounded both wildly inventive and professionally succinct, revealing new mysteries while gaining urgency with each listen. It was an unlikely record on which to build a career, but *Ga Ga Ga Ga Ga* debuted within in the top 10 on the *Billboard* 200 and introduced the band to a new, and much wider, audience.

Spoon's rise seems similarly improbable. After releasing its debut, *Telephono*, in 1996, the band signed to Elektra and readied a follow-up. Despite its astute rethinking of punk and post-punk influences, and despite the easy-sell hooks of "The Minor Tough" and "30 Gallon Tank," the label botched the release, inspiring a seething revenge track about their A&R man. Spoon then spent the 2000s proving that living well is the best revenge: Each subsequent album on the independent Merge Records sired a larger audience and elevated the band's profile. In 2005, *Gimme Fiction* actually courted a mainstream audience, and *Ga Ga Ga Ga Ga* made good on that promise, although the irony of the single "The Underdog" couldn't be missed: Even after they'd broken through, the members of Spoon still considered themselves the challengers, never complacent incumbents.

Spoon continues an impressive run of albums with its seventh, *Transference*—more austere than its predecessors but just as scrappy. Jettisoning the horns and



pervasive studio-as-instrument approach, the band hasn't sounded this raw in more than a decade. An impassioned and unpredictable singer, Britt Daniel changes his approach on every song, shredding his vocal chords on the rough-textured "Written in Reverse" and peppering "Trouble Comes Running" with woos and oohs. He favors repetition as a means to reinforce and undermine his lyrics, slyly dropping out consonants from words and words from phrases. Singing in an R&B-ish falsetto on "Who Makes Your Money?" he puts so many different spins on the title phrase that by song's end, it could mean anything or nothing at all.

Daniel's slightly hoarse vocals fit neatly into Spoon's larger matrix, delivering texture as much as lyrical meaning. *Transference* emphasizes the antagonistic interplay between instruments, including the vocals—it's a tension that has always grounded Spoon's music. One of rock's unsung drum heroes, Jim Eno, pounds out deceptively simple rhythms that keep time tightly and tensely. He favors the hi-hat and kick drum on most of these songs, bolstering the crackle of opener "Before Destruction," the soul-revue bass line of "The Mystery Zone" and the glam-disco of "Nobody Gets Me But You." Rather than click into place with Eno's steady motorik framework, Daniel's guitar and Eric Harvey's keyboards kick against it, scribbling and scrawling against the orderliness that underpins "Got Nuffin" and "Is Love Forever?" Yet they lock step into the headlong instrumental coda of "I Saw the Light" as if it's a hand-wringing "Layla" devised by some gloomy Krautrock band.

Such gimme-friction moments jostle against quieter tracks like the measured "Out Go the Lights" and the startlingly tender "Goodnight Laura," which features Daniel accompanied by a piano theme that sounds like a Billy Joel demo. Spoon has always mixed these soft elements into its twisted guitar rock—Joe Jackson is just as much a spiritual guide for the band as Wire—and on *Transference*, these opposing urges toward frantic momentum and earnest melody create a sense of settling in; not complacency, but something like contentment. In fact, the album's final half makes a stab at directness, both musical and lyrical. "I got nothin' to lose but darkness and shadows ... got nothin' to lose but emptiness and hang-ups," Daniel sings on "Got Nuffin."

Of course, this being Spoon, these songs only suggest openness, when in fact they're as dodgy as anything the band has ever written. "Got Nuffin" implies a newfound freedom from all those dark thoughts, but it also insinuates a nadir, as if they're rebounding from their lowest point. Likewise, glammy closer "Nobody Gets Me But You" conveys an ambivalence toward accessibility and acclaim: "No one gets what I'm doing, everyone else seems to look through it," Daniel sings. "Oh, but maybe I never wanted them to, couldn't count on it anyway." To reinforce his point, the band peppers the song with disruptive snippets—truncated crowd cheers, industrial buzzing, stray piano notes—as if daring you not to get it.

Transference emphasizes the antagonistic interplay between instruments, including the vocals—it's a tension that has always grounded Spoon's music.

While the bandmates sound like the veterans they are on *Transference*, Spoon brings to this new level the same prickliness and elusiveness that has informed all of its previous albums, and that has attracted devoted fans intent on parsing every word and note. Despite the success (or maybe because of it), Spoon is still making music deep in the mystery zone.

8.5

↪ LONGTIME *PASTE* CONTRIBUTOR STEPHEN M. DEUSNER IS A MUSIC AND FILM WRITER BASED IN NEW YORK.

Photo by Autumn De Wilde

Fascinating
PBC
GATOR
06
Meta-Fascinating
Kinnetiff
Mel's Cave
Catarina & Matthew
Gypsy Rose
Mad Wasp

NOTHING TO CROW ABOUT

New songs fly in crooked line

BY JENNA WOGINRICH

ALLISON MOORER

Crows RYKODISC

There's something comfortable about crows—their trademark call, that unmistakable silhouette, and the fact that no matter where I reside, they're always there. I'm no ornithologist, but I think crows are a lot like the men in my life: clever little assholes that win you over with dark humor and reliable comfort. A lot of people have a deep personal association with these vaguely creepy avatars. And perhaps this pandemic of familiarity is why Allison Moorer felt the need to name her new album after the ghost of our collective repose.

The content of *Crows* may be a little cliché for some to swallow, but you have to appreciate Moorer's sincerity. She's a singer/songwriter with a white-knuckled grasp on the theme of these 13 songs: hope. On "Should I Be Concerned," she questions her stability, asking if she should be left alone, unsupervised with access to a running car and a well-insulated garage. (The gritty guitar sustain that follows seems to answer that question.) After working through her own small group session, she arrives at, "Maybe I just need someone to listen to my story." It's a pretty optimistic realization and no small relief.

There's an anthropomorphic cleverness in the lyrics of "Sorrow (Don't Come Around)," since we're never really sure if she's talking about an ex or the emotion itself: "I gotta turn you away so I can keep this hope alive / You're tapping on the window but I won't let you inside / Maybe you'll give up and find somebody else tonight / I draw the curtains, say a prayer, and turn out the light." What the words here lack in depth, they make up for in affirmative power.

Crows may be a little cliché for some to swallow, but you have to appreciate Moorer's sincerity. She's a singer/songwriter with a white-knuckled grasp on hope.

While Moorer is a better singer than a lyricist, her songwriting is solid, and what she has to offer is genuine. And I get the sense that I'd feel even more connected to her work if I'd shared a seat with her on an airplane, or we went to the same elementary school. Her music suggests a familiarity between her and the listener—but if she was a friend, we might get jucier details. When I hear tracks like "It's Gonna Feel Good (When It Stops Hurting)," I'm happy to sing along but I'm just as suspicious. The ballad is strong, but how personal is the story? I don't want to hear generalities about a bad break up; I want to hear the grit. I want to nod, understand and know exactly what she's dealing with. Tell me how you couldn't finish the bottom third of your cup of coffee after the miserable breakup phone call. I don't want to hear about not being able to get out of bed, I want to hear about your boyfriend's flannel getting grafted to your sheets. Moorer's iceberg verses beg for such details.

Crows isn't without merit—Moorer's voice is beautiful, and the themes are on an emotional canvas that anyone over 13 with a normal amount of chromosomes has experienced, making her album relatable if not particularly memorable. Fittingly, this is exactly how I feel about *actual* crows. I appreciate them when they're present, but hardly miss them when they fly out of frame. Like the record, they're organic background in an otherwise distracted life.

5.1

Photo by Angela Kohler

Carolina Chocolate Drops photo by Julie Roberts

SHOUT OUT LOUDS

Work MERGE

Feel-good electro-pop from Sweden—can you believe it?!

On its latest, Swedish pop quintet Shout Out Louds bring their uptempo, '80s-nostalgic style to a collection of songs perfect for that jolt you need to kick off a long road trip. Lead singer Adam Olenius' high-register vocals—which call to mind The Shins' James Mercer—meld unexpectedly well with the pumping beats, making lovely use of background vocalist Bebban Stenborg, whose sweet-sounding responses on "Fall Hard" offset the forceful rhythms, and who harmonizes deftly with Olenius on the otherwise insubstantial "Throwing Stones." Not every song is upbeat ("Walls," for example, is about taking too many pills; and the melodies are softer and more contemplative on "Candle Burned Out"), but the pulse remains undeniably energetic. *Work* sometimes lacks variety, but the mostly unrelenting, feel-good rhythms and sweet vocals are sure to get your head bobbing. **EMILY RIEMER** 7.5

CAROLINA CHOCOLATE DROPS

Genuine Negro Jig

NONESUCH

Musical adventurers reclaim important chapter of black Americana

There's a long tradition of African-Americans playing old-time music, from blues legends Blind Blake, the Reverend Gary Davis and Josh White to artists such as the Mississippi Mud Steppers and Howard "Louie Bluie" Armstrong, whose early ragtime outfit, the Tennessee Chocolate Drops, has provided a lasting influence—and this modern-day act with its name. The Carolina Chocolate Drops formed in 2005 at the Black Banjo Gathering in Boone, N.C., and since then the young trio has been determined to prove that "black folk were a huge part of the stringband tradition." What they've also done is dust off a musical form seen today as either a novelty or the exclusive provenance of ethnomusicologists. To paraphrase Rakim's immortal words, these Drops ain't no joke: Their enthusiasm for the tradition is obvious even as the trio spans from traditional arrangements (the rollicking fiddle rave-ups "Trouble in Your Mind" and "Cindy Gal") to self-penned works (the particularly terrific "Kissin' and Cussin'") and stringband makeovers of modern-day works (a hip-hop influenced cover of Blu Cantrell's "Hit 'em Up Style (Oops!)" and Tom Waits' "Trampled Rose"). Several generations removed from the origins of their chosen idiom, the Carolina Chocolate Drops are nonetheless the genuine article. **COREY DUBROWA** 7.8

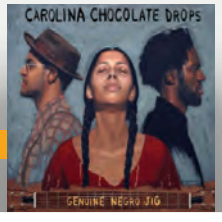
SHEARWATER

The Golden Archipelago

MATADOR

The soundtrack to your next chill-sesh

As if scoring a devastating movie scene in which the main character drives alone through the rain, pondering his weighty problems, Shearwater frontman Jonathan Meiburg emotes in a velvety bellow while pianos clatter and echo, and guitars peek through the shadows, making for gorgeous, endlessly serious music. *The Golden Archipelago*, Shearwater's sixth release, sticks with the plot. But whereas the ethereal solemnity of its previous album, *Rook*, was manifest in memorable hooks, the 37-minute *Archipelago* meanders through its own foggy-graveyard atmospherics. The music is similarly beautiful, but uniformly so—the 11 songs bleed together in such a way that you'll listen through twice before realizing the album began again. *Archipelago* is an argument against verse-chorus-verse structure, and a good one—a rewarding, slow-melting album for patient listeners. **JUSTIN JACOBS** 8.2



ÓLÖF ARNALDS

Við og Við

ONE LITTLE INDIAN

Longtime Múm collaborator finds her singular voice on debut solo record

The first time I saw Ólöf Arnalds perform was in the spring of 2007 at an indoor swimming pool in Bolungarvík (pop. 900), the most northerly village in Iceland's Westfjords. The sound system fed her signal to special underwater speakers that transmitted at a frequency you could only hear fully if you were in the pool with ears submerged. Arnalds was perched cross-legged in a chair on the pool deck, wearing a modest one-piece bathing suit and rubber swim cap, cradling a small nylon-string acoustic in her lap.

Though she played mostly upbeat crowd-pleasing tunes that afternoon (traditional Icelandic favorites and a boisterous rendition of "The Hokey Pokey"), I remember her performing at least one self-penned ballad. The song bristled with quiet intensity as her delicate bird-trilling voice danced agilely around each Icelandic syllable. Bobbing there on my back in the pool, eyes closed, I felt like an embryo in the womb again, straining to listen, with more than my still-forming ears, to a mother's lullaby as it filtered gently into my hiding place in the watery dark.

Arnalds released her solo debut *Við og Við* in Iceland to great acclaim: The country's main newspaper *Morgunblaðið* voted it Record of the Year in 2007. Then it was named Best Alternative Album at the Icelandic Music Awards. Now that the record is finally being released in the United States, Iceland's most talented female troubadour is poised to win over a legion of new fans. Though the entire record is sung in Icelandic, Arnalds conveys her intimate musings on friendship and family with such tenderness that the lyrical meaning and the brittle beauty of her delivery function seamlessly. To appreciate one is to intuitively sense the other.

Arnalds wrote "Vittu Af Mér (Know I'm There)" for older sister Dagný about her earliest childhood memory—receiving a drink of water scooped from a stream by her sister's own hand. "Klara" was written for her younger sister's 18th birthday, and in the lyrics Arnalds asks to visit her soon, and encourages her to keep on drawing and making music. She wrote "Í Nýju Húsi" for her mother, wishing her restful sleep in her new house. *Við og Við*'s earnest, heartfelt declarations are a welcome change from the too-cool posturing of so much of today's popular music. Familial affection will never go out of style; neither will deftly plucked stringed instruments, subtle orchestral swells and a songbird lilt this impossibly lovely. **JASON KILLINGSWORTH** 8.5

THE MAGNETIC FIELDS

Realism

NONESUCH

Stephin Merritt completes his "no synth" trilogy

Providing the counterpart to 2008's noise-pop experiment *Distortion*, The Magnetic Fields' latest, *Realism*, is the band's first attempt at folk music. Setting aside all instruments requiring an electric cord, Stephin Merritt and his bandmates trade the former album's fixation on feedback and fuzz for a focus on crisp textures and neatly arranged acoustic instruments such as banjo, tuba, cello and accordion. Merritt, a master of melodic nuance and austere wit, favors the mixing pot explored by '60s and '70s British folk-revivalists, with that era's emphasis on eclecticism and exploration informing his drift through gorgeously dainty chamber pop ("Seduced and Abandoned"), toy-piano lullabies ("The Doll's Tea Party") and boisterous singalongs ("We Are Having a Hootennany"). It's less "old, weird America" and more "new, weird Merritt." Bringing a suitable conclusion to his "no synth" trilogy, this, the Magnetic Fields' eighth album, provides yet another example of why Merritt belongs on the shortlist of America's greatest songsmiths. **MATT FINK** 7.8

Photo by Vera Palsdottir

ATHLETE

Black Swan

FICTION

Ten catchy choruses, no original ideas

Paired with a *Grey's Anatomy* clip in which someone dies or falls in love, Athlete's mid-tempo rock might pack a punch. But when alone, the sweeping choruses that swarm Athlete's fourth record, *Black Swan*, shoot for the rafters without any substantial emotional anchor—the songs get lost in the clouds. Blame Coldplay, a band that makes genuinely grandiose music look easy. With *Black Swan*, Athlete joins the ranks of Coldplay clones (Snow Patrol, Keane, et al) in a land of make-believe where every chorus is huge, every guitar plays only quarter notes and every song is about overcoming an unexplained hardship. Athlete packages emotions like greeting cards, as on the plodding, string-laden "Black Swan Song" where frontman Joel Pott cries, "My body is weak, but my soul is still strong / I am ready to rest in your arms." Perhaps this message is true, but it's all been said before. **JUSTIN JACOBS** 3.0

PATTY GRIFFIN

Downtown Church

EMI/CREDENTIAL

Folk songstress offers Sunday-morning spirituals

The details behind Patty Griffin's seventh release are intriguing enough without listening to a single song: The entire record was cut in a 160-year-old Presbyterian church that once welcomed Andrew Jackson and survived the Civil War as a hospital for Union soldiers. There's something about Griffin's trilling pipes ricocheting through this vast and timeworn sanctuary that paints the album in an otherworldly, eternal hue as she dips deeply into gospel traditions. On pastoral lullaby "House of Gold," Griffin belts through the sleepy ambience of organ and guitar, denying earth's most precious metals for her faith in an invisible grace. She then swiftly shifts to fire-and-brimstone judgments like "Death's Got A Warrant" and "I Smell A Rat." Despite such drastic turns, the record retains Griffin's unquenchable yearning for the heavenly world to come. **GAGE HENRY** 7.4

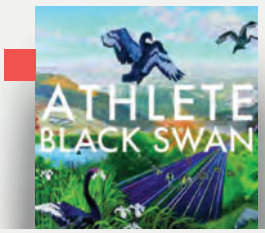
THE WATSON TWINS

Talking to You, Talking to Me

VANGUARD

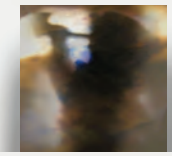
Mediocre mewling

Soft pop—*good* soft pop—has a place in the world. Not every song must electrify. But The Watson Twins make Norah Jones sound like Sharon Jones. They make She & Him sound like Ike & Tina. Their spectacularly boring new album has so little dynamic variance that it literally pains the ear. It's full of mid-tempo songs with midrange vocals—everything about the record is mid. The concept seems to have been a neo-folk torch-song collection, brimming with close harmonies. In practice, the harmonies disguise faux-smoky vocals that cannot stand alone. The vox on the aptly named "Tell Me Why," for instance, are of karaoke quality. And the voices aren't the only problem. The drums on "Calling Out" were apparently close-mic'd and then recorded in a cave. Reverb is everywhere, making the badness echo. It apparently took two producers to create this folly—take a bow, Russell Pollard and J. Soda—and it's astounding that neither they nor the twins recognized their mistakes before it was too late. **NICK MARINO** 1.1



THE REPORT

BY JUSTIN JACOBS



ANIMAL COLLECTIVE ***Fall Be Kind*** DOMINO

If *Merriweather Post Pavilion* was Animal Collective's dance party, this follow-up EP is the early-morning comedown, awash in dreamier sound swirls that float like a mid-ocean buoy. Even the up-tempo jams—namely the bouncing "What Would I Want? Sky," with its sample of the Grateful Dead's "Unbroken Chain"—maintain an open-field enormity.

COLD WAR KIDS ***Behave Yourself*** DOWNTOWN

This four-song set sprints off the block with "Audience," a funky piano stomper as hooky as anything the band has set to wax, with one verse led by handclaps—likely yours included. But the wiggling guitar jam "Coffee Spoon" is a distinct step down, and the nondescript warble "Santa Ana Winds" another, making the EP behave like a great single with forgettable B-sides.

DEER TICK ***More Fuel For the Fire*** PARTISAN

With four songs in 11 minutes, Deer Tick's iTunes-only EP doesn't have enough fuel to get very far. Its only memorable track is rousing live cut "Straight Into A Storm," lifted from breakthrough album *Born On Flag Day*. The Providence, R.I., band's controlled country-rock chaos, pulled off passably on *Flag Day*, is as quick here as a whiskey hiccup, but it won't leave you clamoring for another swig.

Half-Handed Cloud photo by Brandon Buckner

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FOUR TET

There is Love in You

DOMINO

Electronic auteur revisits his past, digs deeper into hypnotic dance grooves

While he's hardly been inactive during the five years since the last Four Tet LP (releasing a set of remixes, a Fridge album and no less than four collaborations with avant-garde jazz drummer Steve Reid), Kieran Hebden has lost some momentum since he revolutionized electronic music with his use of folk instruments on 2003's *Rounds*. That he hasn't really tied up the loose ends of that experiment into some definitive statement is both a small disappointment and a large testament to his creative restlessness. Part minimalist dance record, part undulating sound collage, his new album serves as a scrapbook of nearly every idea Hebden has examined and cast aside during his career. His showmanship has hardened into nuance and understatement, and here he deconstructs oscillating dance grooves and stuttering electronics into the hypnotic nine-minute "Love Cry" and casts halos of acoustic guitar over hazy synthesizers in "Circling," the latter providing a partial answer to how Hebden might update his bridge across the acoustic/electronic divide in the 21st century. **MATT FINK** 7.1

Photo by Jason Evans

THE SOFT PACK

The Soft Pack KEMADO

California quartet sports new name, old sound

Familiarity often gets a bad rap in modern music. Granted, most every standard-issue rock 'n' roll band will bring to the seasoned listener's mind any number of previous standard-issue rock 'n' roll bands, but incorporating one's influences as opposed to simply aping them is a special kind of science. Enter The Soft Pack. The California foursome once known as The Muslims (changed for reasons you can probably imagine) operates within the grand tradition of melody-gorging rock acts before it, from The Strokes to Spoon to The Modern Lovers. But where many of its contemporaries settle for mere derivation, The Soft Pack uses its instantly catchy references as jumping-off points, taking songs to unexpected places replete with guitar-and-keyboard-led spazzouts and fist-pumping, shout-along choruses. Like meeting an old friend after years apart, The Soft Pack is surprisingly, comfortably familiar. **AUSTIN L. RAY** **7.8**

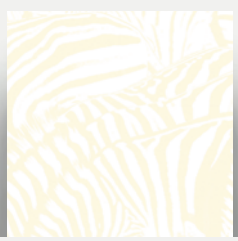
BEACH HOUSE

Teen Dream

SUB POP

Baltimore duo wakes up, shakes up

Teen Dream sounds just like Beach House and not at all like Beach House. On their first two albums, Victoria Legrand and Alex Scally created warm, lo-fi pop songs that favored subdued ambience over pronounced hooks, as if each song was designed to dissipate in the air between the speakers and your ears. By contrast, the duo's new songs are less hazy and more forceful—they actually *project*. Singing in a bold style that suggests a huskier-voiced Kate Bush, Legrand sounds androgynous on "Walk in the Park" and breathy on "Norway." Scally, meanwhile, creates prickly arrangements full of narcotic guitars, reverbed piano and woozy synths that shimmer over spare, steady percussion. *Dream* is a go-for-broke collection that not only creates and sustains a hi-fi drowse-pop drama throughout its 10 beguiling songs, but comes across like a logical and gorgeous extension of all the band's previous dreams. **STEPHEN M. DEUSNER** **9.0**



Beach House photo by Jason Nocito

"In a class with Gillian Welch or Lucinda Williams."
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BAROQUE SABBATH

Shape-shifting Texas band takes hard left turn

BY BART BLASENGAME

MIDLAKE

The Courage of Others BELLA UNION

The disappointing thing about most Molly Hatchet albums—beside the fact that they're horrible—is the blatant deception of their covers. During the band's heyday, Hatchet album art featured a hulking, wide-eyed barbarian swinging a massive battleaxe as sinew and bits of bone fell about him like crimson snow. It was, in a word, *badass*. But when you dropped the needle, out came a sickening bilge of chuggin' boogie blues and butt rock. The only thing hemorrhaging was your ears.

So thank Christ for whoever art-directed Midlake's new album cover, *The Courage of Others*. Here we have a pissed-off dude in a hooded cloak looking like the Wizard of Williamsburg, and a vaguely psychedelic mirror-image effect that turns entwined fingers and background trees into buds of broccoli. It's at once trippy, foreboding, and beguiling. Hit play and immediately it makes sense: Ladies and gentlemen of Midlake fandom, after a nearly four-year layoff, we are taking a

hard left turn. Next stop, the Middle Ages.

Whereas 2006's *The Trials of Van Occupanther*, the band's breakthrough, had lazy journalists reaching for phrases like "modern Fleetwood Mac" or "East Texas Radiohead," *Courage* has *this* lazy journalist reaching for "Baroque Sabbath."

Gone are the sleepy, piano-driven lo-fi grooves—the nod to '70s guitar rock that Midlake admittedly did better than most, but that still left them pigeonholed alongside equally mellow bands like Vetiver. This time out, Midlake has left its native Denton, Texas, for a place *way* south of somber. It's a much darker, oppressively minor-key world where songs have a madrigal lilt, vocals are layered like sediment, guitars (mostly acoustic) are gently strummed, echoing flutes and droning Floyd-ian keyboards provide atmosphere, and where there is much moping all around. This isn't metal, but thematically, at least, it's just as heavy.

At times—in fact, most of the time—this doesn't even sound like the same band that made *Van Occupanther*. (Or, for that matter, *Bamnan and Slivercork*, their Grandaddy-period 2004 debut.) But this is a good thing. *Occupanther* was a solid record—and "Roscoe" a great song—but the shambling shoegaze pop was familiar. At its best it resembled Grizzly Bear. At it's worst, alt-Fray. Either way, Midlake didn't own it. With *The Courage of Others*, the band's continual sonic tinkering has led its members down a lonely road they can call their own—a sound of unwavering menace and maddening restraint it's hard to imagine the rest of the flock following.

The most immediate sign of this sea change is singer Tim Smith's delivery. Where he chose a high Yorke-ian whine the last time out, he's now stripped his vocals of almost all color, subduing himself almost to the point of becoming lyrical wallpaper. His lines are still double-tracked, and the delivery—sleepy, erudite, scheming—sounds repetitive at times, but it's an effective anchor throughout the album, as background vocals billow around, forming a sort of rock 'n' roll chamber choir.

Right out of the gate, "Acts of Man" sets the bleak tone, a downtrodden meditation on some end-of-the-world scenario—"If all that grows starts to fade, starts to falter, oh let me inside, let me inside"—where monochrome harmonies brood over strummed guitar. Each verse grows in strength until the end, when the track finally reaches a subdued, yet forceful, gothic release.

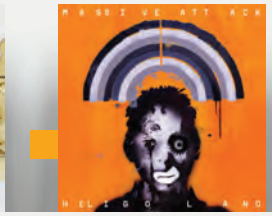
This unrelenting but beautiful melancholy forms the glut of *Courage*. Beauty is key here, especially with a song like "Bring Down," where an otherwise depressing dirge is given liftoff by Smith's sweet harmony and a twittering flute. It's cinematic and slow-building, and would seem right at home soundtracking an ancient massacre on some desolate stretch of Scandinavia as galloping hordes with stone faces crush the enemy in slow-mo beneath their steel.

It's an exercise in painstakingly plaintive pain that's not unlike, say, José González. Except that Midlake is smart enough to take time out every couple tracks to wreck your speakers. Guitarist Eric Pulido doesn't get to announce his presence very often, but when he does—on burners like "Winter Dies" and "The Horn"—he sets fire to the darkness, choking out snarling, sinewy contrails of guitar that sound like lightning squeezed from a tube of toothpaste.

It's all gloomy and mesmerizing—just like the Wizard of Williamsburg on the cover said it would be.

9.1

Photo by Bil Zelman



LIARS

Sisterworld

MUTE

Transient, experimental rockers continue to reward, evolve

Geography has always defined Liars. The band—which formed in Los Angeles with a menacing Australian frontman named Angus Andrew—first received attention after relocating to New York. Liars would later make an album in New Jersey that was loosely based on German witchcraft, only to *actually* move to Berlin for their next album. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Liars' return to Los Angeles had a profound effect on the band's fifth LP, *Sisterworld*. Concerned with grand existential ideas such as Identity Vs. Society and how weirdos and individuals can get along with the masses, the record might as well be the soundtrack to Liars' big-screen biopic. Featuring a mix of straight-ahead rockers ("The Overachievers"), willfully abrasive headbangers ("Scarecrows On a Killer Slant") and gorgeously ominous odes ("No Barrier Fun"), *Sisterworld* is petulant, rewarding and ultimately lonely. It's a record that refuses to pick a style or lock step with the world that exists around it, much like the band that created it. **AUSTIN L. RAY** 7.9

MASSIVE ATTACK

Heligoland

EMI/VIRGIN

New, hushed direction speaks volumes

Heligoland—like its 2003 predecessor, *100th Window*—steers far from what Massive Attack first pioneered as trip-hop. "Pray for Rain" only catches a glimpse of light, with TV on the Radio's Tunde Adebimpe harmonizing before sinking back into its melancholic contemplation. Brass notes resound throughout, as mournful as a Dixieland funeral. And even the handclaps on "Paradise Circus" relinquish their volume to a hushed message: "The devil makes us sin / But we like it when we're spinning in his grin." Instead of reintroducing the genre's founding dub steps and club sensibilities, contributions from Massive Attack's musical descendants (Blur/Gorillaz mastermind Damon Albarn, Portishead's Adrian Utley) lend quieter atmospherics that amplify the emotion of the band's mainstay whispers. Less a depiction of the surrounding apocalypse, *Heligoland* is more a reflection of the anxieties within. **CHRISTINA LEE** 8.5

CORINNE BAILEY RAE

The Sea

CAPITOL

Rae stays strong on long-awaited sophomore album

The path to Corinne Bailey Rae's sophomore record was surely a difficult one. In 2008—just two years after the British artist's promising self-titled debut—her husband of seven years, saxophonist Jason Rae (Amy Winehouse, Lily Allen, Mark Ronson), died of an accidental drug overdose in a Leeds flat. It's unclear whether Rae's sophomore album is directly influenced by this tragedy, but the gorgeously arranged tracks do have a tendency toward somber introspection. Listening to *The Sea*, there's also a sense of personal and artistic growth—rebirth even. The record is refreshingly eclectic, adding several new layers to Rae's previous blend of classic soul and modern R&B. She dishes out some funky pop-rock, flirts with a Norah Jones-style singer/songwriter approach, some wistful bossa-soul fusion and subtle trip-hop flourishes—even a string-laden epic that would fit nicely in a lounge scene from a '60s Bond flick. As a vocalist, Rae's restraint is far more powerful than any over-emoting belter on the pop circuit, her liquid-soft vocals washing over you like a light spring rain, bringing new life—even in the wake of the darkest winter. **STEVE LABATE** 7.8

LOS CAMPESINOS!

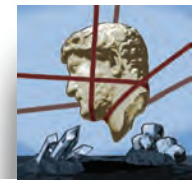
Romance Is Boring

ARTS & CRAFTS

A grown-up examination of young love

Barely a year after this Welsh band's *We Are Beautiful, We Are Doomed* listed scattered hookups and throw-ups, *Romance Is Boring* elaborates on the cause of it all: a girl with remarkable moles on her back. This emotionally turbulent journey underpins the band's best lyrics yet, as it thrashes between drunken begging and dangerous insults: "I am a pleasure cruise, you are gone out to trawl / Return nets empty, nothing at all." Fuzzy atmospherics crash in, overpowering some of *Romance*'s most brutal quips, forcing the band to struggle at making its musings rhythmic and begging for its earlier punk-twee punctuation. But at the end of this swirling mixture of radio noise and catchy choruses, *Romance* reiterates the point of both musical and emotional growth: to remember the past, not relive it. **CHRISTINA LEE** 7.0

Corinne Bailey Rae photo by Tierney Gearon



HOT CHIP

One Life Stand

EMI

Electro-pop quintet's latest dancefest runs hot and cold

Hot Chip has always embraced paradox, juxtaposing masterfully crafted computerized tunes with heartfelt expressions of love, anger and melancholy. On the group's fourth LP, a contradiction of substance emerges, and some of the band's most brilliant compositions to date sit side-by-side with some of its dullest.

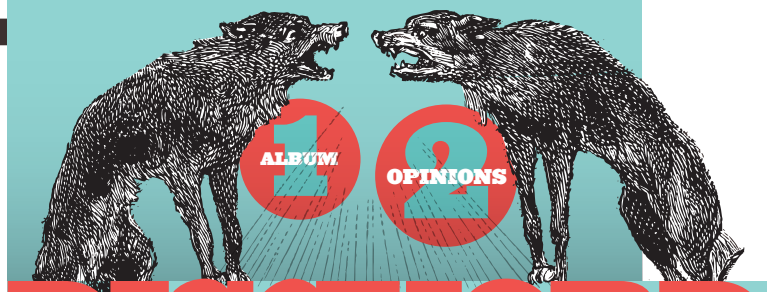
One Life Stand's best songs attain the elusive simpatico between catchy hooks and disarmingly earnest lyricism that make Hot Chip the thinking-man's dance band. The minimalist mid-tempo boogie of "Hand Me Down Your Love" slowly adds layers of synth and other instrumentation until the whole soufflé collapses, leaving only haunting, ethereal vocals: "I've known for a long time / You are my love-line / So why can't I be bright / Like my lover's light."

The title track is an otherworldly fusion of infectious tropicalia and synth drone, and the kick/snare drumbeat is the extra push that makes it a toe-tapper. Closing track "Take It In" is one of the group's finest moments. Lyrics like "Oh, my heart has flown to you just like a dove / It can fly" would be pure drivel in less musically dexterous hands, but the monotonic delivery of the surrounding verses transforms these lines into vast swathes of devastatingly bright color across this electro-industrial canvas.

For those dizzying highs, there are some comparable lows, too; the album is plagued with filler. The unfortunately named "Slush" is just that: a hazy, indistinct mess of piano stings and vocal meanderings. "I Feel Better" attempts a regrettable fusion of Cher and the dregs of mid-'90s dance pop, with an overuse of AutoTune and grating six-chord progression on the chorus. And "Keep Quiet" splits the difference between Enya and Peter Gabriel for a regrettable approximation of electro-tinged world music.

But even with that dead weight, *One Life Stand* is a worthwhile album peppered with lackluster songs, and not vice-versa. With Hot Chip, you tolerate inconsistency for occasional moments of bliss. **MICHAEL SABA**

6.8



YEASAYER

Odd Blood

SECRETLY CANADIAN

NEEDS A TRANSFUSION

As proven on *All Hour Cymbals* and now on *Odd Blood*, Yeasayer knows how to set the stage for a great adventure. But while chipmunk falsettos may have replaced human howls on this interplanetary trek, these voices are still telling the same aimless tale. Starting with an intimidating first encounter, only now with distortion-voiced aliens ("The Children"), the band's venture into a new world peaks entirely too early, with standout single the gurgling "Ambling Alp" replacing the last album's chanting "2080." From there, save for weak extraterrestrial stabs at R&B ("Love Me Girl") and swing ("Mondegreen"), this quick rise to crowning glory descends slowly into dull ruminations on fleeting optimism. "I know that home is where you want me / There's not much for me there," Anand Wilder sings in "Madder Red." But as we find out, there's not much for us out in space, either. **CHRISTINA LEE**

TYPE A-POSITIVE

Having delivered its 2007 debut right on the cusp of indie rock's imminent turn toward world music and day-glo psychedelics, Yeasayer's *All Hour Cymbals* was more experiment than proper pop album, a disorienting maze of harmonized yelps and frantic handclaps. More than two years later, the Brooklyn trio's uneven edges are polished by layers of finely calibrated melodies on a backdrop of perky polyrhythms and analog abstractions. The same manic energy remains, bubbling through the skittering beats and farting synthesizers of "Ambling Alp" and the slippery white-boy funk of "Love Me Girl." But here the focus never shifts from Chris Keating's surprisingly soulful lead vocals, which seem pulled from some alternate '80s, strangely familiar yet startling in their immediacy. With only the cascading harmonies of "Grizelda" offering evidence of the band's tangled roots, this version of Yeasayer has as much in common with New Order as it does Animal Collective, its many moving parts rebuilt upon a synth-pop engine. **MATT FINK**

Hot Chip photo by Bevis Martin and Charlie Youle

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JULIANA HATFIELD

Peace and Love

YE OLDE

Modest atmosphere, fearless honesty

The circularity of the modern rock ride is unnerving sometimes. The Blake Babies' cult momentum brought Juliana Hatfield to the doorstep of Atlantic Records nearly 20 years ago, and you wonder if she would've flinched knowing that her 11th album two decades later would be self-recorded in a Cambridge bedroom. If forced modesty is the hallmark of the current business model, at least Hatfield has the grace to pull it off without bitterness or recrimination. While her album shares its laptop atmosphere with many other troubadours plying Boston's streets, it's sprinkled with heavyweight pro touches that belie her deeper legacy. "Why Can't We Love Each Other" is a simple, breathless should-be hit, and the tightly compressed guitar solo on "What Is Wrong" screams with a veteran's assurance. "Evan," her fearless ode to, yes, Evan Dando shows that Hatfield is not afraid to one-up spartan with naked—and beautiful. **JEFF LEVEN** **7.1**

MILES KUROSKY

The Desert of Shallow Effects

MAJORDOMO/SHOUT! FACTORY

Former Beulah frontman still a little weird, wonderful

Miles Kurosky's old band, Beulah, was always the one Elephant 6 act somewhat tethered to the earth—writing and delivering relatively straightforward love songs, even as its more mind-expanded peers sang dreamily of kings of carrot flowers and birds with candy-bar heads. *The Desert of Shallow Effects* is Kurosky's first solo effort since dissolving Beulah five years ago, and, happily, his singular gift for melody-rich pop hasn't deserted him. The result is an album brimming with stories of slightly off-kilter characters—such as the n'er-do-well protagonist of "Dead Language Blues," whose mother calls him "all the time" to see if he's still "failing ... tempted each day by European ways, speed freaks and strays"—and driven by a classicist's nose for hooks. Other key tracks, like the loping "She Was My Dresden" (and its sterling "please send me to the moon" coda), resemble a younger, more urbane Jeff Tweedy, mixing up folk sensibilities and kitchen-sink instrumentation as if these odd juxtapositions were always meant to be heard in such close proximity. **COREY DUBROWA** **7.0**

Juliana Hatfield photo by Jonathan Stark

LIGHTSPEED CHAMPION

Life is Sweet! Nice to Meet You DOMINO

See me after class

Devonté Hynes' sophomore album as Lightspeed Champion offers a smattering of well-shellacked chamber-pop tunes and little else. The requisite balance between guitar jangle ("There's Nothing Underwater") and melodramatic piano balladry ("Romart") means *Life is Sweet! Nice to Meet You* will serve as a tolerable soundtrack to at least two months' worth of New England sorority parties. But the overproduction and studio gimmickry haunts the halls of this collegiate rock, constraining Hynes' squeaky-clean instrumentation between alternating tedium and banality. There are occasional moments where this background noise flirts with listenability, thanks to a clever verse ("Chelsea tees and Socrates still haunt me"), but Lightspeed Champion seems mostly content to hold court as an inoffensive also-ran to Vampire Weekend. And like an antisocial freshman holed up in his dorm, *Life is Sweet* has no desire to leave the comfortable confines of self-possessed sentimentality. **4.8**

MICHAEL SABA

Photo by David Swanson

ROC-A-FELA

Once-controversial Nigerian artist's body of work reissued and reconsidered

BY MICHELANGELO MATOS

FELA KUTI

The Best of the Black President 9.8
Koola Lobitos 1964-1968/
The '69 Los Angeles Sessions 7.3
Live! (with Ginger Baker) 6.2
Shakara/London Scene 8.1
Roforofo Fight/The Fela Singles 8.3
Open & Close/Afrodisiac 8.5
Confusion/Gentleman 9.3
(KNITTING FACTORY)

The idea that Fela Kuti—the outspoken Nigerian bandleader, polygamist, commune head, and thorn in the side of a military government that subjected him to constant harassment and several arrests—would someday become respectable enough for Broadway would have likely made Kuti himself laugh until smoke from his ubiquitous weed stash poured from his ears. Yet that's exactly what has happened: *Fela!* opened at the Eugene O'Neill Theater to ecstatic reviews in November, and British director Steve McQueen (*Hunger*) is working on a film adaptation, with Jay-Z rumored to be involved. (Maybe he liked hip-hop DJ Mike Love's 2008 mixtape *Nigerian Gangster*, which blends Jay's vocals with Fela's music.)

All of this comes right in time for Knitting Factory Records' mammoth reissue of Kuti's catalog—45 albums total, in chronological bunches, beginning with six CDs that cover his first decade on record. This undertaking will expose him to a bigger U.S. audience than ever before. Kuti's commitment to the extended- mantra jam means double-CD *The Best of the Black President* contains only 13 songs, several of them edited down, since a typical Kuti jam lasted between 10 and 30 minutes. But there's no better overview of the simmering overload that was Kuti's patented Afrobeat—a meld of funk, jazz, Nigerian highlife and Yoruban drum ensembles—created with crucial input from monster drummer Tony Allen.

Born in 1938 to a prominent feminist-activist mother and minister father, Kuti began his career recording the singles released as *Koola Lobitos 1964-68* with his first band, then called Koola Lobitos. The early stuff is heavier on highlife and jazz, blended in a relatively straightforward fashion. By the mid-'60s, when he took the same band to L.A. (renaming the group Fela Ransome-Kuti and Nigeria 70, and later Africa 70), he began blending in a more soul-oriented approach, as on the high-stepping glide of "Viva Nigeria" (a spoken-word anti-war hymn) and the spiraling, airy "Obe" and "Ako," heavy on Igo Chico's saxophone. *London Scene*, recorded in 1970, thickens the stew, introducing the martial aspect that would mark Kuti's groove—the horns and drums marching as well as boogieing, locking step as much as rubbing against one another. "Buy Africa" hinted at a more militant lyrical style, as well.

Kuti's groove was perfected on 1971's *Open & Close* (paired with 1973's *Afrodisiac*) and *Shakara*, which sum up early Fela: choppy, virulent, electrifying compositions that build steadily toward explosive climaxes. (*Shakara*'s notorious cover photo features 50 topless women forming the outline of Africa and the number 70 with Kuti in the middle of the "0.") *Roforofo Fight/The Fela Singles*, from 1972, is even more strident: "Rofoforo Fight" features some of Kuti's most lively vocalizing over equally playful rhythms, while "Shenshema" builds to an outlandish keyboard solo. But the essential twofer in this series—and in the Kuti catalog, period—is *Confusion/Gentleman*, from 1975 and 1973, respectively. "Confusion" is the most spaced-out music he ever made—a lollygagging keyboard fantasia gradually opening into languid, expansive band interplay, an oasis in a sandpaper-like catalog. "Gentleman," on the other hand, is one of Kuti's knottiest rhythm beds, with his rough-and-tumble sax playing—he took the chair himself when Igo Chico left, to mixed results—reflecting a lyric that pours scorn on Africans wearing stifling Western suits and ties.

London Scene thickens the stew, introducing the martial aspect that would mark Kuti's groove—the horns and drums marching as well as boogieing, locking step as much as rubbing against one another.

There is, of course, a lot more Kuti on the way—almost his entire catalog is set to be reissued in this next year and a half. Most of the remaining albums are a scathing mockery of authority in Nigeria (1975's *Expensive Shit*, 1977's *Zombie*, 1980's *Authority Stealing* and 1981's *Original Suffer Head*, 1992's *Underground System*) and beyond (1978's *Shuffering & Shmiling*, 1980's *I.T.T.*, 1989's *Beasts of No Nation*), and cries of fury at his own mistreatment by authorities (1977's *Sorrow Tears and Blood*, 1980's *Coffin for Head of State*). Kuti died of AIDS in 1997, some time after he'd stopped recording, but his legacy is permanent. Listening again, it's not going to budge anytime soon.

MICHELANGELO MATOS WRITES MUSIC COLUMNS FOR *THE STRANGER* AND *THE A.V CLUB*.

Photo by Bernard Matussière

JAWBOX

For Your Own Special Sweetheart

DISCHORD/DESOTO

Dischord Records acquires and reissues ship-jumping post-hardcore classic

During the 1980s, Washington D.C. punk music underwent a sea change in which ideologically rigid hardcore yielded to broader shades of emotion and artistry. In Minor Threat and Fugazi, Ian MacKaye straddled and defined this shift; the less iconic but equally great J. Robbins was by his side, first in Government Issue, and then in Jawbox, which melded ferocious power with heart-wrenching melody and rock swagger with intellectual urgency. Like contemporaries Shudder to Think, Jawbox made its greatest record, 1994's *For Your Own Special Sweetheart*, after bailing on beloved indie Dischord and signing to a major label. This reissue—with brawny remastering by Bob Weston and three extra tracks from the *Savory* + *3* EP—arrives just after the band's one-off reunion on *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*. Fifteen years later, the explosive trebles of "Savory" still inspire goosebumps, as do the twisted-metal guitars of "Motorist." "What would you risk to rescue me?" Robbins bellows in his usual shouting-down-the-sky style. This music sounds like everything's on the line. **BRIAN HOWE**

8.7

VARIOUS ARTISTS

Fire in My Bones: Raw + Rare + Otherworldly African-American Gospel [1944-2007]

TOMPKINS SQUARE

No-frills box set captures complex, contradictory nature of classic black gospel

Since the moment sincerity was rendered and reformatted as an entertainment commodity, pop music has wandered away from one vital element: spirituality. The adage goes that early pop simply swapped "God" for "baby," dulling music's power to connect on a spiritual level. More than half-a-century later, *Fire in My Bones* ambitiously catalogs the age of black gospel music spanning the end of WWII and the ascendancy of rock 'n' roll, paying special attention to the era's more neglected sounds. This is gospel music for even the Jesus-averse, so gritty and genuine that it often seems to emanate from below. The boundary between raw gospel and sanctified blues gets blurrier as congregational recordings are presented alongside solo performances, the street corner alongside the pulpit. Efficiently cited and unwrought with typical box-set aplomb, this three-disc collection is an equally inspirational and informative document of American soul. **COY KING**

9.1

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LORD OF THE DRUG RINGS

Crime epic builds on *Godfather* and *Gomorra*

BY SEAN EDGAR

A PROPHET

RELEASE DATE: FEB. 26

DIRECTOR: Jacques Audiard
WRITERS: Audiard, Thomas Bidegain, Abdel Raouf Dafri, Nicolas Peufaillit
STARRING: Tahar Rahim, Niels Arestrup, Adel Bencherif
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Stéphane Fontaine
STUDIO/RUN TIME: Sony Pictures Classics, 149 mins.

A Prophet is the second significant modern crime film to come from Europe in the past two years. Italian director Matteo Garrone packed an ever-expanding plot into *Gomorra* and its dissection of Napoli's Camorra crime family, and Cannes' Grand Prix winner *A Prophet* keeps the felonies coming, focusing on prison drug syndicates in France. Both films excel at taking a cold, documentarian look at their respective underground ringleaders without backhanded glamorization. And both pack a brass-knuckled punch. *A Prophet* sees its ascendant thug Malik El Djebena (Tahar Rahim) painfully shove a folded razor into his mouth for an assassination assignment, a perfect marriage of adrenalized plot and assumed reality. Call it *Noir Verite*.

Unlike *Gomorra*, though, the most alluring aspects of *A Prophet* look beyond crime, just as *Godfather* scribe Mario Puzo said that his canonized epic was more a reflection on American immigration than a Tommy-gun demonstration. The story begins with Malik, a bewildered, illiterate 19-year-old tossed into a prison that bears an uncanny resemblance to an American university dorm. Charged with assaulting a police officer, the teenage offender is soon introduced to a prison yard built around racial battle lines.

France is certainly no stranger to ethno-religious strife, and this continual undercurrent gives the film much of its subliminal weight. In 2002, Jean-Marie Le Pen ran for president with xenophobic hyperbole and finished second with 18 percent of the vote. Le Pen was later fined in 2005 by a Parisian Court for "inciting racial hatred," and in 2007 *Le Monde* quoted him saying, "You can't dispute the inequality of races." That same year saw riots erupt in the Southern city of Perpignan, spurred by clashes between the Romas and North African Arabs.

Half Arab and half Corsican (from the French Mediterranean island populated by Catholics), Malik is left in a precarious position defined by this extreme sociological backdrop. Simultaneously maligned and embraced by his dual heritage, he uses his genealogy and bilingualism to maneuver around Arabs, Corsicans and Italians in the prison until each warring faction is either neutralized or in his debt. Herein lies the film's ironic morality. Its "hero" manipulates racism as a tool to control the intolerant, uniting the color-blind and downtrodden into a triumphant force—to deal drugs. While there is no internal voiceover to explain Malik's aspirations, it's safe to assume that benevolence isn't a goal, especially when he's stifling the competition in a pile of sanguine bodies. The message is about as cynical an affirmation of brotherhood as be, and this provocative ambiguity makes the question less about moral ideals than how morality can facilitate blind survivalism.

> The most alluring aspects of *A Prophet* look beyond crime, just as *Godfather* scribe Mario Puzo said that his canonized epic was more a reflection on American immigration than a Tommy-gun demonstration.

Rahim nails his character's mercurial arc as a wallflower who evolves into a commandant. Likewise, Niels Arestrup provides a more realistic, imperfect rendition of Marlon Brando's wizened capo archetype; as Malik's boss, father figure and unspoken nemesis Cesar Luciani, Arestrup vacillates between forced calm and volcanic rage (the most memorable instance involving an eyeball and a spoon). Filled with resentment, the only constant in Arestrup's captivity is the fear that he'll lose control of his fleeting empire and, ultimately, his dignity. Such honed characterization fuels this two-and-a-half hour epic into a mesmerizing slow burn. And for those who revere the gospels of De Palma, Scorsese and Coppola, *A Prophet* delivers the right message.

8.4

Photo by Kerry Brown, courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics

➥ SEAN EDGAR IS A WRITER, PHOTOGRAPHER AND GOLDEN-RETRIEVER-WRESTLER TENTATIVELY BASED IN BROOKLYN. HE GENUINELY LOVES CREPES AND THE TOWN OF CHERBOURG.

HAPPY TEARS

RELEASE DATE: FEB. 19

DIRECTOR/WRITER: Mitchell Lichtenstein
CINEMATOGRAPHY: Jamie Anderson
STARRING: Parker Posey, Demi Moore, Rip Torn, Ellen Barkin, Christian Camargo
STUDIO/RUN TIME: Roadside Attractions, 95 mins.

Complicated yet oddly light family story

Watching a parent's health deteriorate is always a uniquely excruciating process: For Jayne (Parker Posey) and Laura (Demi Moore), two sisters who reluctantly return to Pittsburgh to confront their alcoholic father's worsening dementia, the experience is equal parts bizarre and heartbreaking. *Happy Tears* is Mitchell Lichtenstein's second feature (his first, dark 2007 comedy *Teeth*, remains the definitive text on vagina dentata). Somewhat appropriately, *Happy Tears*' title is borrowed from a painting by Lichtenstein's late father, legendary pop artist Roy Lichtenstein. At bottom, the film is about legacies—what we inherit, what we can change, and how we process the burdens (and blessings) of our DNA.

The father, Joe (Rip Torn), isn't particularly sympathetic; he's unfaithful, is entangled with a prostitute masquerading as a nurse (Ellen Barkin) and incessantly cackles the raunchy old blues song "King Bee" ("I'm a king bee baby, buzzing 'round your hive / Together we can make honey now baby, if you let me come inside"). The grotesqueness of the situation is laid bare, but *Happy Tears* is an oddly light film—at Joe's insistence, Jayne and Laura dig up the backyard in search of buried treasure, and Jayne periodically indulges anxiety-driven hallucinations (early on, a shoe salesman morphs into a vulture) that lend the film a welcome shot of surrealism. Like any family, *Happy Tears* is complicated and raw, but not without love.

AMANDA PETRUSICH 7.4

THE LAST STATION

IN THEATERS NOW

DIRECTOR: Michael Hoffman
WRITERS: Hoffman (screenplay), Jay Parini (novel)
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Sebastian Edschmid
STARRING: Christopher Plummer, Helen Mirren, Paul Giamatti, James McAvoy
STUDIO/RUN TIME: Sony Pictures Classics, 112 mins.

Tolstoy's final war

Despite its wandering backstory and revisionist depiction of a germinating religious movement helmed by one of the greatest authors of the 20th century, *The Last Station* features brilliant performances by both Christopher Plummer as the aged Leo Tolstoy and Helen Mirren as Sofya, his long suffering wife and working partner of 48 years.

Seen primarily through the eyes of Tolstoy's newly appointed and idealistic secretary Valentin (James McAvoy), the author's last days are occupied with the establishment of an anarchist religion that is explicitly despised by Sofya. She fears that Leo, with help from his devoted assistant Chertkov (Paul Giamatti), is assigning all royalties of his novels to the Russian people, thus leaving her with nothing. While Sofya's mercurial temperament destroys the tranquility of the Tolstoy estate, Valentin's loyalty to Tolstoy and Chertkov is compromised by his sympathy for Sofya and his sexual awakening with beautiful freethinker Masha (Kerry Condon).

Each explosive confrontation between Leo and Sofya is a form of cinematic alchemy only a pair of masters like Plummer and Mirren could pull off. It's an affair of love and hate, history and legacy—one that inspires Valentin to appreciate the spirit behind Tolstoy's Christian anarchism, a movement which the film, regrettably, never really addresses.

TIM BASHAM 7.1

THE WHITE RIBBON (DAS WEISSE BAND)

IN THEATERS NOW

DIRECTOR/WRITER: Michael Haneke
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Christian Berger
STARRING: Christian Friedel, Leonie Benesch, Maria-Victoria Dragus, Ulrich Tukur, Burghart Klaußner
STUDIO/RUN TIME: Sony Pictures Classics, 145 mins.

Sometimes evil is black and white

The White Ribbon looks deceptively familiar—like an old *Twilight Zone* episode, or one of those late-night films discovered while channel-surfing. But Michael Haneke's seemingly simple, black-and-white story—set in a German village just before the start of World War I—is a step above and a grade darker than your average whodunit. When the town's doctor is seriously injured by a booby trap, the adults are mystified but the children are strangely silent—a fact that only the town's schoolteacher seems to notice, while the deaths and disappearances continue. The characters most central to the film are also most central to the village—the doctor, the pastor, the baron. And hidden behind their families' doors are the secrets of a child's nightmares—sexual improprieties, corporal punishment, death. Bear in mind, this is the same generation that will be responsible for the future horrors of Nazi Germany. By the time the end credits roll, almost two-and-a-half hours later, questions still remain, and Haneke fails to provide neatly tied answers. But he also gives us the necessary tools to explore the film's depths, as if to say, "I've taken you this far. Isn't that enough?" **8.3**

TIM BASHAM

SAINT JOHN OF LAS VEGAS

IN THEATERS NOW

DIRECTOR: Hue Rhodes
WRITERS: Rhodes (screenplay) Dante Alighieri (story)
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Giles Nuttgens
STARRING: Steve Buscemi, Sarah Silverman, Romany Malco, Peter Dinklage, Tim Blake Nelson
STUDIO/RUN TIME: IndieVest Pictures, 85 mins.

Buscemi divine in Sin City comedy

Steve Buscemi projects such a specific persona that it's nearly impossible to see him as anything other than himself. Supporting in an impressive number of the last two decade's best films (*Miller's Crossing, Reservoir Dogs, Fargo, The Big Lebowski, Big Fish*), he's either the weird, insecure, vaguely pathetic good guy or the weird, insecure, vaguely pathetic bad guy. But when Buscemi is given enough time and space, he creates remarkably nuanced and moving characters—even within those claustrophobic parameters. In *Saint John of Las Vegas*, he's engaging and sympathetic as a reformed-gambler-turned-insurance-adjuster whose first assignment as a fraud investigator takes him across the desert, ever closer to the dangerous pull of Las Vegas. Sarah Silverman is charming and funny, and the camerawork is highly stylized and visually sumptuous, filled with bright, contrasting colors and geometric patterns that director Hue Rhodes calls an homage to Piet Mondrian. References to *Dante's Inferno*—our hero is named John Alighieri, and he's led by a man named Virgil closer and closer to our modern-day "Sin City" of Las Vegas—become almost laughably heavy-handed when we meet a sinister figure named Lou Cypher. The Dante-colored surface-coating wasn't necessary; the film stands up on its own. **8.1**

MICHAEL DUNAWAY

Saint John of Las Vegas photo courtesy of IndieVest Pictures

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WHATEVER LOLA WANTS, LOLA GETS

Max Ophuls finally gets his due.

BY ANDY BETA

LOLA MONTÈS

RELEASE DATE: FEB. 16

DIRECTOR: Max Ophuls
WRITERS: Ophuls, Cécil Saint-Laurent, Annette Wademant
CINEMATOGRAPHERS: Christian Matras
STARRING: Martine Carol, Peter Ustinov
STUDIO/RUN TIME: Criterion, 115 mins.

Way back in the early 2000s, the films of German-born, Paris-based director Max Ophuls languished out of print. While the French *nouvelle vague* and its insouciant modernity, guns, dames and jittery jump cuts remained much feted, discussed and repackaged, Ophuls and his fin de siècle Europe, aristocratic mores, women on the verge of nervous breakdowns and *looooooong* tracking shots fell out of sight. He might've remained in darkness were it not for the support of admiring directors like Stanley Kubrick, Todd Haynes and P.T. Anderson, and *The New Yorker*'s Anthony Lane, who raved that "the atmosphere in [Ophuls'] movies is so congenial, and the brilliance so lightly worn, that we may not notice how acutely he is laying bare our illusions."

With the painstakingly restored fever dream of his financially and critically catastrophic last feature, *Lola Montès*, our portrait of the artist in his final years is complete. Eliza Rosanna Gilbert—a dancer and actress most often called by her stage name, Lola Montès—pioneered the "cult of celebrity." Paramour to composers Franz Liszt, Frederic Chopin and Richard Wagner, not to mention numerous dukes, counts and even King Ludwig I of Bavaria, her affairs were fodder for the papers, and sometimes cause for riots. In our age, where celebrity indiscretions bump war reports from the front page, it's easy to see the role Montes played in the public consciousness 150 years previous.

It's fitting then that Ophuls anticipates such modern media circuses, eschewing simple biography for his heroine and setting her in a context more grandiose and garish: a real circus. The film opens with Montès, the main attraction in a pinwheeling fanfare of crimson and gold, as an American audience crassly barks questions about her past lovers and physical measurements. "We'll show everything that women dream of doing, but lack the courage to do," the circus carnie proclaims, enacting the scandals that made (and unmade) Montès.

Originally released in 1955, this story of the most scandalous, sexually liberated and licentious woman of the 19th century was a box-office flop.

From the big-top tent, we're whisked around the world as our heroine marries for love, fortune, fame and whimsy, each scenario cast in an audacious, delirious tint. Montès' ascent through European high society in the middle 19th century is recast as a trapeze stunt, the ringmaster shouting, "Every single act of hers is fraught with danger!" We follow Montès and her reckless passions through palaces and theaters, backstages and boudoirs, but our sight remains partially obscured behind veils, scrims, stained glass, curtains. It's an Ophuls trademark, making the audience aware that the very act of observing is always compromised and composed of theatrical artifice.

Originally released in 1955, this story of the most scandalous, sexually liberated and licentious woman of the 19th century was a box-office flop, so poorly received that producers excised 20 minutes and hacked the story to a linear narrative that only further confused viewers. Finally, in 2008, the film received a much-needed facelift and restoration, presented here on this two-disc set. What we see now is as close as we'll get to Ophuls' original version of what his narrator deems "the most sensational act of the century." Names like Jamie Jungers, Rielle Hunter and Daisy Wright have disappeared from our gossip pages, but the name of Lola Montès, and our last glimpse of her "among the wild beasts," will remain in the light.

8.9

Photo courtesy of the Criterion Collection

↪ IN ADDITION TO MAX OPHULS, ANDY BETA ALSO ENJOYS THE KINKS' "LOLA." HE MAINTAINS BETA BLOG @ ANDYBETABLOG.BLOGSPOT.COM.

NURSE JACKIE: SEASON ONE

RELEASE DATE: FEB. 23

CREATORS: Linda Wallen, Liz Brixius, Evan Dunsley ?
STARRING: Edie Falco, Eve Best, Peter Facinelli, Paul Schulze, Merrit Wever
STUDIO/RUN TIME: Showtime/Lionsgate, 20 mins.

Showtime's answer to* House *slightly frustrating but mostly fascinating

Edie Falco plays Showtime's latest morally ambiguous protagonist, a cranky ER nurse who's snorting painkillers and having sex with the hospital pharmacist (how convenient) while the World's Best Husband waits for her to come home to him and their two girls. Jackie Peyton is a maddening, two-faced character, kind and empathetic with her patients and stoically hurtful to the people closest to her. Her moral code is erratic, but intriguing—she flushes a patient's ear down the toilet because he stabbed a woman, and then promptly returns to her day-to-day routine of getting high and committing adultery. The supporting cast brings out the worst in her and the best moments in the show: Eager nursing student Zoey worships the ground Jackie walks on; narcissistic doctor Fitch Cooper has an inexplicable crush on her, and fashionista doctor friend Eleanor O'Hara knows about all her transgressions and refuses to judge her, creating a twisted friendship and an unusual dynamic for two female characters. But just as that ear Jackie flushed eventually surfaces—because body parts don't exactly dissolve in the pipes—at first season's end, so do some of her dirty secrets. **7.1**

KATE KIEFER

HUNGER

RELEASE DATE: FEB. 16

DIRECTOR: Steve McQueen
WRITERS: McQueen, Enda Welsh
STARRING: Michael Fassbender, Stuart Graham
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Sean Bobbitt
STUDIO/RUN TIME: Criterion Collection, 90 mins.

Intense feature debut not starved for brilliance

Turner Prize-winning British artist Steve McQueen makes his feature debut with *Hunger*, a soul-rattling film about brutality and deprivation conceived as sensory overload. Not a conventional biopic, the drama takes an inside-out view of events leading to the 1981 hunger strike and death of Irish Republican Army activist Bobby Sands and nine others in Northern Ireland's Maze Prison. The shit-covered cell walls, the brutal beatings—even the routine of someone washing his hands takes on an acutely amplified resonance, as the camera boxes the viewer within a living hell that becomes an unlikely platform for transcendence. Michael Fassbender (*Inglourious Basterds*) is extraordinary as Sands, starving himself to skin-and-bone for the role. McQueen's severe, minimalist approach to the material makes *Hunger*'s statement more aesthetic, perhaps, than humanist. But it's no less wrenching for that—perhaps more so. Bonus points for the climactic use of Maya Beiser's searing cello performance of Sofia Gubaidulina's "Industry," which underscores the already Christ-like Fassbender's act of brotherly sacrifice. **8.7**

STEVE DOLLAR

WEEDS: SEASON 5

OUT NOW

CREATOR: Jenji Kohan
STARRING: Mary-Louise Parker, Justin Kirk, Alexander Gould, Hunter Parrish, Alanis Morissette
NETWORK: Showtime

Dynamic fixture of TV comedy continues to grow

The sly creative energy that crackles through every season of *Weeds* gives the series a light, easygoing veneer, the sense that it's in no particular rush to get anywhere. But as a matter of craft and sheer endurance, it has proven itself one of the canniest shows on the air. Early this season, the characters seemed to be tangled in the past—Nancy uses a pregnancy to ward off certain execution by drug lord Esteban, Celia is kidnapped by fickle revolutionaries (including her long-lost daughter), and Andy declares his love for Nancy a little too emphatically. But, just like that, in a startling midseason turnaround, the show jumps forward six months into a newly invigorated world of political intrigue and prickly irreverence that has become its finest mode.

Weeds proved in its fifth season just how keen it is to evolve, most boldly in the journey of Shane, Nancy's doe-eyed youngest son, who has grown into a bizarre, ominous adolescent worthy of Noah Baumbach. The show hums at such an agreeable register that it's easy to overlook its ingenuity, but the new ground forged each season is cause for esteem. **8.4**

JEFFREY BLOOMER

AZIZ ANSARI: INTIMATE MOMENTS FOR A SENSUAL EVENING

OUT NOW

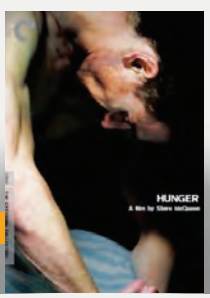
STARRING: Aziz Ansari
STUDIO/RUN TIME: Comedy Central/56 mins.

Standout standup

Aziz Ansari restored my faith in standup. The 26-year-old comedian was the last to perform at Comedy Central's show at Bonnaroo last year. By that point, I'd decided standup routines weren't for me, that my fond memories of Chris Rock, Richard Pryor, Bill Cosby and Bob Newhart were misleading—they were rare exceptions and nostalgia clouded my recollections. Even that night at Bonnaroo, the finest comedy writers—smart and wonderful in short, edited bursts for *The Daily Show*—delivered material that fell flat as often as not. It seemed they realized this and relied on frequent genital jokes and profanity for the quick, cheap laugh (much like the character Randy, which Ansari created for Judd Apatow movie *Funny People*). Then Ansari took the stage. I laughed more during his performance than in the five that preceded it combined. While his routine would earn the same MPA rating in a movie, he didn't use sex and obscene language as a crutch. His was a quick, smart and fresh comedy that delivered from beginning to end. He used observational humor, but in a way that felt authentic and unique—as opposed to a rehash of Jerry Seinfeld or Bill Cosby. Whether he was talking about fraudulent thread-counts on sheets or harassing his young cousin on Facebook, Ansari's timing was a joy to behold. Often, his asides were every bit as funny as the main jokes, displaying a magnificent wit. There was a certain effortlessness to his delivery that heightened the performance. I didn't feel like he was trying too hard (as opposed to, say, latter-day Robin Williams performances).

All of this is captured in his new DVD, *Intimate Moments for a Sensual Evening*. Most of the material in the roughly one-hour performance comes from the act he's been delivering for the past year, and there's also 30 minutes of older material in the bonus features (although the production quality is sorely lacking). But despite the dearth of new material, the DVD is a worthwhile snapshot of one of contemporary comedy's best. **8.6**

TIM REGAN-PORTER



WHAT HAVE THE LAST 10 YEARS DONE TO FICTION?

Four new releases give us an idea BY CHARLES MCNAIR

Tom Junod—*Esquire* magazine writer, friend and MacArthur genius award waiting to happen—calls the years 2000-2009 "The Uh-0s." My own term? "The Dread Naughts."

Both names get at something fundamental about what a sudden shock the decade was, at how badly it rattled expectations. Whatever happened to the Pax Americana promised by the fall of The Wall and the thawing of the Cold War? Whatever happened to our American Dream?

The first 10 years of the new centenium certainly gave writers much to absorb—it was chockfull of "material," as we say. The decade seemed to compress events the same way technology compressed features and functions, the way clocks compressed hours, making us busier, bustlier.

Want the grind of a Great Depression, a la the 1930s? You got it in the '00s. How about a surprise attack by a foreign enemy, then bloody war, circa the 1940s? Check. How about a sharp conservative turn (1950s)? A landmark achievement for black Americans (1960s)? The word "China" in bold headlines (1970s), the unchecked, government-sponsored greed of corporations (1980s), the slouching-toward-Bethlehem widening gyre between political ideologies (1990s)?

Yes, we've had it all since all those fireworks at the close of ancient 1999, a millennium ago, back when Prince partied hard and real life felt a lot less like fiction.

Whatever you call the span of time, the past 3,652 and one-half days are bound to have had an impact on American writing. Here are four new works, products of that jarring decade, reviewed through the lens of the 2000s.

JOSHUA FERRIS

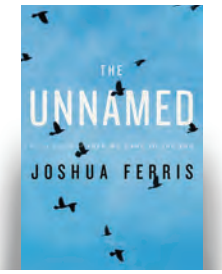
The Unnamed **[FICTION]**

REAGAN ARTHUR BOOKS; LITTLE, BROWN

Poignant tale of illness and love

Here we have the first great novel of the new decade, and one of the best of this young century. This book will vault Ferris into the literary center ring with our best young writers—the Chris Adrians and Junot Díazes and Zadie Smiths and Marcus Zusaks of the earth.

Ferris offers us the heartbreaking tale of Tim Farnsworth, a high-rolling lawyer at a silk-stocking Manhattan firm. Tim contracts a bizarre illness that forces him, on the moment, to stop whatever he's doing and strike out walking. It is a punishing illness, psychically and physically. He cannot make his body stop to rest. He cannot control the direction his body travels. He cannot predict where or when he'll wake up, utterly exhausted, from the attacks—frostbitten in a snowbank, filthy in a dumpster, confounded in the back seat of a strange car.



His long-suffering wife Jane will eventually handcuff him to their bed (get ready for the unkinkiest bedroom scenes imaginable) to keep him safe at home. Their teenaged daughter can't fully believe her father isn't a head case; indeed, neither can the best MDs money can buy. Tim's strange malady—the "Unnamed" of the title—gets him written up in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, but doctors can't script him a cure or even a real diagnosis. There's nothing like this illness in medical history—illness as terrorist, impossible to predict, impossible to stop.

Ferris writes most poignantly of the destruction the illness wreaks on Tim and Jane's 20-year marriage. In sickness and in health? Any love risks being shaken to pieces as chronic illness takes hold—especially an illness that strikes with such weird lightning, fades into remission, then unexpectedly flashes again. What couple could stay together? What love could endure the test? What spirit could hold off despair?

Any love risks being shaken to pieces as chronic illness takes hold—especially an illness that strikes with such weird lightning, fades into remission, then unexpectedly flashes again. What couple could stay together? What love could endure the test? What spirit could hold off despair?

Describing the tale of the Farnsworths sounds woeful and dire but, amazingly, the book is a page-turner. (I sat down to take a critical sniff. When I put the book down 100 pages later, I blinked in surprise—night had fallen as I'd read.) Especially gripping is a section in which Tim musters the will to partly take back his physical self from *the other*, the name he's given to the compulsion that commandeers him. This struggle occurs during Tim's brutally challenging journey home (yes, on foot) to his ill wife after the walking sickness has wandered him clear across the United States.

Ferris's first novel, *Then We Came To The End*, earned the young New Yorker plenty of accolades. Nothing in that work prepared us, though, for his new novel's quantum leap in voice, gravity, storytelling and emotion. The first work showed "promise"; that's a play-it-safe term reviewers will employ (I'm guilty) when they fear some unchecked moment of enthusiasm for a new writer or work might later cause embarrassment.

Not this reviewer. Not this novel. Forget "promise." Joshua Ferris has arrived running, not walking. *The Unnamed* will make his name. 9.5

THE MANY DEATHS OF THE FIREFLY BROTHERS
THOMAS MULLEN
THE GIRL WHO FELL FROM THE SKY
HEIDI W. DURROW
Everything here is the best thing ever
Justin Taylor

THOMAS MULLEN

The Many Deaths of the Firefly Brothers

[FICTION]

RANDOM HOUSE

Robbing banks, stealing hearts

Atlanta-based writer Thomas Mullen set his critically lauded first novel, *The Last Town on Earth*, in the Pacific Northwest during the terrible Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918. From the 90-years-past reality he invokes in the evergreen mists of Washington, he clearly researches as well as he writes. Mullen also had an uncanny prescience—H1N1 was just a series of random letters and numbers when he released his frightening account of a world dying in a flu plague.

This new novel gives us the Fireson Brothers, popularly known as the Firefly Brothers, who roam the Midwest robbing banks during the Great Depression. The Fireflies have a habit of getting killed during their capers but, like characters from a Flann O'Brien work, they refuse to stay dead. They wake up in morgues or in the beds of vehicles on the way to hospitals and make their getaways.

Mullen writes with great brio, and the world he conjures can be hilarious, hideous and hearkening—much here feels like the American underbelly in our current economic downturn. **8.6**

HEIDI W. DURROW

The Girl Who Fell from the Sky

[FICTION] ALGONQUIN

Stuck in the middle

This first novel won the 2008 Bellwether Prize for Fiction, awarded by Barbara Kingsolver to recognize fiction that addresses issues of social injustice. Durrow, a Portland, Ore., native, tackles a Great American Problem—race. It's a subject worth any number of books, now more than ever.

Our story: Rachel, a young woman with a Danish mother and an African-American father, survives a tragedy that kills all the family she knows. She moves in with a strict African-American grandmother and experiences the world of black Americans for the first time. With her blue eyes and light skin, she learns what so many others have—it's not easy to grow up betwixt and between.

Durrow herself is biracial, and she writes capably on this subject. Still, she doesn't always succeed in making you feel for her characters or believe her plot. Or perhaps I failed to more completely identify because I'm a white man.

Other readers may be more powerfully moved, feeling to the bone the slights, grievances and complications that escape me. **6.3**

Justin Taylor photo by Bill Hayward. Heidi W. Durrow photo by Timothi Jane Graham

JUSTIN TAYLOR

Everything Here is the Best Thing Ever

[FICTION]

HARPER PERENNIAL

Feisty, zeitgeisty

Justin Taylor's first short-story collection artfully captures the view of the 2000s from the perspective of a twentysomething. I'll be surprised if we don't find two standout pieces from this collection in prize-winning anthologies of 2010 short stories.

"In My Heart I Am Already Gone" reads like a suburban Barry Hannah (the title even suggests Hannah, to those who know his work). "Jewels Flashing in the Night of Time" pulls off the improbable literary act of conflating a young couple's experiments in S&M with the fun and games at Abu Ghraib. A disturbing work, it sticks in your head like a black thorn.

Taylor lives in Brooklyn, teaches at Rutgers. He's written for *The Believer* and *Paste*, and anthologized a collection of end-of-the-world stories (*The Apocalypse Reader*). Several of his stories bear the unmistakable, bloggy influence of the 2000s. Do we sense some sort of new fictional frontier? Time will tell. **7.9**

CRITICAL HIT

One fantasy RPG to rule them all

BY ADAM VOLK

DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS

DEVELOPER: BIOWARE & EDGE OF REALITY, INC.
PUBLISHER: ELECTRONIC ARTS
PLATFORMS: XBOX 360, PS3, PC

Dragon Age: Origins actually made me nostalgic for the awkward, pimply days of my youth, when Friday nights were spent cloistered in my parents' basement playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, and the chances of landing a girlfriend seemed about as likely as stumbling upon a +12 vorpal sword on the way to gym class. That's not to say the game will appeal only to those of us who spent our adolescence wallowing in 12-sided die and social misanthropy. On the contrary, it may just be one of the most accessible and entertaining action RPGs in years, a title with appeal for both novice gamers and recovering Dungeon Masters alike.

This won't surprise anyone familiar with BioWare's impressive catalog. The Electronic Arts-owned game developer has earned a well-deserved reputation for creating action-packed role-playing-games steeped in a Gygaxian gameplay style. *Dragon Age*, however, is a return to form for BioWare and a worthy successor to the legendary *Baldur's Gate* franchise. It's also a trial by dragon fire as the Canadian developer's first foray into an entirely new fantasy world.

Like any RPG worth its saving-throw modifiers, *Origins* opens with a robust character-design system. In addition to the now-ubiquitous categories of sex, race, class and attributes, the game features six playable backgrounds, offering several unique hours of initial gameplay to flesh out a character's backstory. By the time the first chapter of *Origins*' primary storyline begins, players are fully immersed in the world of Ferelden, a sprawling medieval realm inhabited by dwarves, elves, humans and monsters. The setting is far more than generic fantasy fare—in typical BioWare style there's an encyclopedic level of history, political factions and characters inhabiting what feels like a living, breathing world.

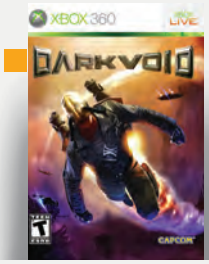
Players soon find themselves enlisted in the Grey Wardens, an elite band of heroes tasked with defending Ferelden from the Darkspawn, a malevolent race of magical creatures. As the game's epic storyline develops (with your adventure clocking at well over 70 hours, the adjective "epic" feels almost conservative), morality and choice soon factor into both story progression and gameplay. And decisions are far more than simple "do something good" or "do something bad" conundrums. In some cases, players must make some genuinely tough calls, opening up side quests that can have a domino-like effect on the primary story arc. And there's also the possibility of developing relationships with other characters.

Dragon Age: Origins perfectly captures that certain *je ne sais geek* of the role-playing experience.

Origins' gameplay owes much of its conceptual mechanics to the *Baldur's Gate* franchise, offering what's essentially a turn-based combat system, with players controlling their characters and issuing commands to a variety of customizable and fully fleshed-out party members. Combat is addictive, fast-paced and highly strategic, with decisions taking place in real-time—though the inclusion of a combat-pause feature is a nice touch, allowing players to catch their breath, manage resources and figure out the best tactical situation before jumping back into the action. The combat system is wildly entertaining, deeply satisfying and customizable enough to appeal to both button-mashing action junkies and stat-obsessed gamers looking to whet their battleaxes with a hack 'n' slasher.

Dragon Age: Origins perfectly captures that certain *je ne sais geek* of the role-playing experience, from the lavish character customization and monster-filled dungeon raids to the sharp graphical details and sweeping Tolkienesque narrative. BioWare has rolled the dice on an original new RPG franchise and—to borrow a phrase from my old *Dungeon Master's Guide*—scored a natural 20-style critical hit. **8.9**

➥ ADAM VOLK IS A CANADIAN WRITER, EDITOR AND VIDEO-GAME NERD.



Dark Void

DANTE'S INFERNO

DEVELOPER: VISCERAL GAMES
PUBLISHER: ELECTRONIC ARTS

The game Puritan minister Jonathan Edwards should've made his congregation play

If Tim Schafer's depiction of the infernal in *Brütal Legend* reached for a kind of Spinal Tap joviality, *Dante's Inferno* might as well be taking its cues from Vince Locke's twisted album-cover illustrations for Cannibal Corpse. Loosely—*very* loosely—based on the work of Italian poet Dante Alighieri, the game re-imagines Dante as a knight returned from the Crusades to find his beloved Beatrice murdered and dragged to the underworld by Death himself. As you descend through the nine circles of hell to steal her back and atone for your sins, you'll hack, slash and button-mash your way, *God of War*-style, through hordes of vividly imagined grotesquerie. While a game using hell as a backdrop could easily present a nice, tidy good/evil showdown, *Inferno*'s plot spends much of its time navigating the ocean of moral grey in between. Dante must confront the atrocities he committed during the Crusades, even though the Church had assured him he was carrying out God's work. Thirty seconds in a hell this terrifying would disabuse the most stubborn soul of any delusions of self-righteousness.

8.4

JASON KILLINGSWORTH

Dante's Inferno

DARK VOID

DEVELOPER: AIRTIGHT GAMES
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
PLATFORMS: XBOX 360, PS3, PC

Capcom's take on* The Rocketeer *loses altitude fast

Dark Void has all the trappings of an absolute mega-blockbuster title. The game's storyline piles on intrigue, following cargo pilot William Gray, whose plane crashes in the Bermuda Triangle. From there he crosses into a parallel universe called the Void, which you'd swear was the mystical Paradise Falls from Pixar's *Up*, save for the malevolent cyborg cult stirring up mischief. *Battlestar Galactica* composer Bear McCreary wrote the game's phenomenal score, and one of the video-game industry's most talented voiceover actors, Nolan North (*Uncharted*, *Assassin's Creed*), brings to life the game's protagonist. With such a bulletproof formula, it's utterly confounding that—with the exception of some thrilling, airborne rocket-pack freewheeling—*Dark Void* just isn't particularly fun.

The game's level design feels downright prosaic: You slog through unremarkable set pieces shooting wave after wave of robotic Watchers, all of which look basically the same except for some minor differences in coloration, behavior and arsenal. Despite wielding a presumably substantial production budget, *Dark Void*'s art department appears to have collectively moseyed into the office after lunch, traced a few stencils of droids from the *Star Wars* prequels, shaken each other's hands and called it a day. Several hours into the game, *Dark Void* provides the perfect metaphor for its own failure. While liberating some trapped human survivors from the futuristic pods holding them captive, I was prompted to "press B to rewire control panel." When I hit the B button, instead of doing any appreciable rewiring, Gray simply punches the unit and rips out the device's innards. While this hamfisted approach may prove successful in opening futuristic prison pods, games require a bit more finesse—and a lot more inspiration.

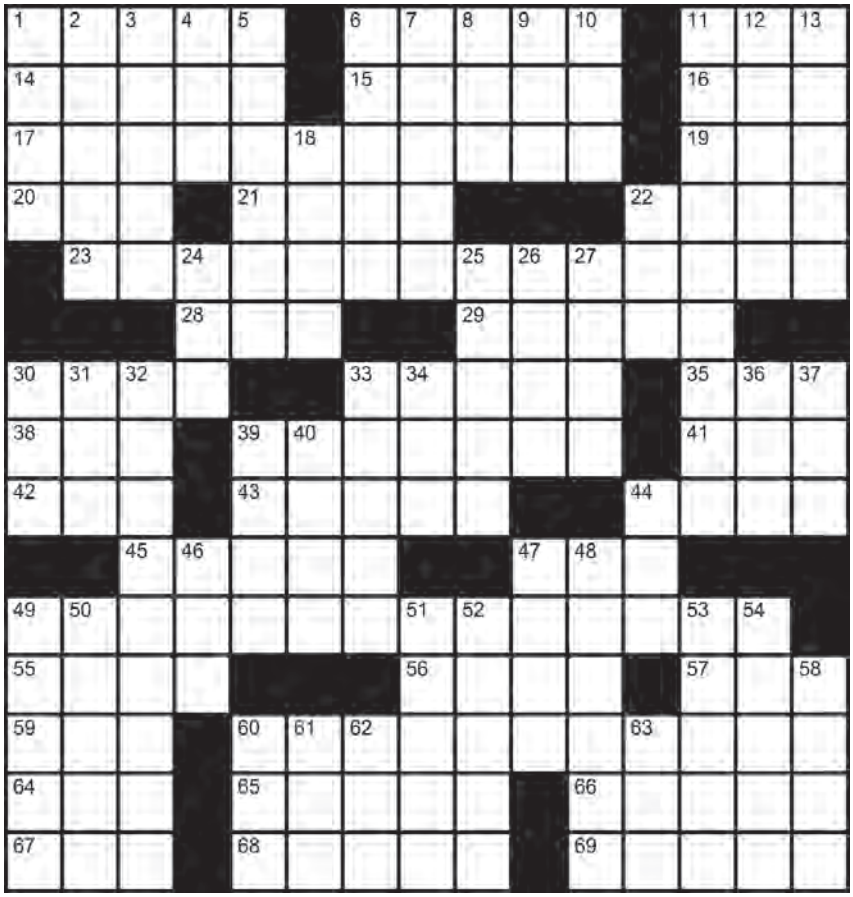
3.9

JASON KILLINGSWORTH

CROSSWORD

INDIE LABELS

BY BRENDAN EMMETT QUIGLEY (BRENDANEMMETTQUIGLEY.COM)



ACROSS

1 High land
6 Certain berth
11 Short order, for short
14 Catlike
15 Kind of jacket
16 "Huzzah!"
17 MERGE
19 Cheat
20 Lieberman, e.g.: Abbr.
21 Drawn tight
22 Area
23 EPITAPH
28 "A rat!"
29 Mountain crest
30 La ___ ("Bulletproof" singer)
33 ___ White, Jennifer Hudson's role in *Dreamgirls*
35 1991 Oliver Stone presidential film
38 Buddhist discipline
39 ANTI
41 Victorian, for one
42 Parenthesis, essentially
43 Alpha's opposite
44 Complete
45 Ken Lay's former company
47 ___ cry
49 MUTE
55 Minutemen bassist
56 1981 Stephen King thriller
57 Attention getters
59 "___ pig's eye!"
60 MATADOR
64 Biol., e.g.
65 "Er...um..."
66 *La Bohème*, e.g.
67 Big ___ Conference
68 Flings
69 Vestibule

DOWN

1 Washington nine
2 "Snowy" bird
3 Baby grand, e.g.
4 1936 candidate Landon
5 Didn't disturb
6 Full-length
7 Basil-based sauce
8 ___ Beta Kappa
9 .0000001 joule
10 Bleed
11 SST
12 Late Alice in Chains singer Staley
13 Varieties
18 "All ___ of you ..."
22 Clearasil target
24 Tex- ___
25 Free-trade acronym
26 Ashtabula's lake
27 Bad look
30 Longtime Wu-Tang Clan producer
31 "___ the fields we go"
32 TOUCH AND GO
33 Javelin, e.g.
34 Befuddle
36 Away
37 Slugger Matsui
39 *Cheers* regular
40 *Typee* sequel
44 "A jealous mistress": Emerson
46 After expenses
47 Film maker?
48 Many
49 Chubby Checker's dance
50 *The Legend of Bagger* ___
51 Acclaim
52 Homer's boss
53 Words of dismay
54 Bête ___
58 Bandy words
60 Lighter brand
61 Emma player in *The Avengers*
62 Bassist Claypool
63 Mail place: Abbr.

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HOBBITS are Tolkien Minorities
MO MONKEY MO PROBLEMS
An apple
APATHY
I could take it or leave it.
Ambiguity
What happens in Vagueness stays in Vagueness

UNGLUED

GAME DESIGN FOR DUMMIES

BY JASON KILLINGSWORTH

From: Management
Subject: **INTERNAL MEMO TO ALL EMPLOYEES OF TRIPLE APE STUDIOS, GAME DESIGN DIVISION:**
Date: February 1, 2010 11:17:02 AM EST
To: Game Design Division

Dear Staff,

If you're reading this, it means you survived the eighth—and quite possibly final—round of layoffs. Congratulations!

These are recessionary times, my friends. Triple Ape has downsized from nearly 800 employees and offices in Seattle, London and Tokyo to this lean, mean team of 14 working out of a Compton strip mall beside a nail salon called Sexy In The City. But that doesn't mean we have to stop making great video games. It just means we need to a) streamline our approach to concepting future projects, and b) each start bringing our own toilet tissue to work, as the company will no longer be supplying any in the restroom.

The goal from this day forward is to replicate the video-game industry's tried-and-true success stories. Please select one option from each of the categories below and get ready to ship our next hit game! [Note: please be environmentally conscious by not printing this email or switching on the lights in the office when there is perfectly free daylight available.] - MANAGEMENT

SETTING:

1. Spaceship drifting through the outer reaches of the solar system. Crew frequently refers to an ominous legislative body called the "intergalactic senate," "trans-galactic congress," etc.
2. Nazi Germany during the early 1940s—or 2040s, if the idea of cyborg Nazis tickles your fancy. The key here is killing Nazis and lots of them. Bloodthirsty, non-English-speaking Nazis—got it?
3. Post-apocalyptic wherever you like. Seriously, throw a dart at a map.

PROTAGONIST:

1. Grizzled dude with menacing bass voice. The sight of his biceps on a hi-def display should make any gamer under age 12 spontaneously urinate in fear. If you suspect the game will involve any kind of military struggle, circle this choice and proceed to the next category.
2. Wise-cracking, thirtysomething, stubbly chinned guy who belongs in a fratty sports bar hitting on college chicks, but with enough suspension of disbelief could maybe—possibly, if the circumstances called for it—save the world from imminent mortal threat.
3. Cartoon rabbit, or some other kind of adorable woodland creature. Must have floppy ears and eyes like whitewall tires. Must talk in a squeaky, unintelligible voice and bump into things for mega laughs.
4. A woman. If you select this option, accentuate her bosom circumference to such laughable degrees that she appears incapable of maintaining her balance in a standing position—and yet she must be able to jump, flip and wield futuristic weaponry.

CONFLICT:

1. Invasion by snarling, grunting, ugly-mug alien race.
2. Crosstown race against heat-packing illegal aliens in hijacked Ferraris.
3. Something vaguely reminiscent of the movie *Aliens*, but with names changed and all that.
4. The exact plot of the movie *Aliens*. (If sued, we'll tell James Cameron's lawyers, "No offense to Mr. Cameron, we're sure the movie's visual effects were stunning back in the late '80s, but we've never actually seen it." How can they prove otherwise?)

WEAPON:

1. Ordinary-looking Samurai katana blade. The twist is that its tip emits a super high-frequency beam of light that chars your enemy's retinas. While the blinded enemy is writhing about in agony, players can run up to them and *heeeeeeyah*!
2. Modified rocket launcher that hurls rabid, genetically enhanced porcupines at foes. The enemy is caught off guard because they're expecting rockets. Also, there's one final surprise: The quill tips are dipped in poison for extra killing power.
3. Racially charged invective. As long as hit games like *Modern Warfare 2* continue to pit players against Eastern European, Russian or Chinese terrorists/crime bosses, this weapon is sure to damage the enemy's spirit, no matter how tough they pretend to be with their machine guns and black-woolen balaclavas.

MARKETING COPY:

1. One of the most intense cinematic videogame blockbusters to ever sneak up behind your game console and slash its jugular. Your block just got busted!
2. This cinematic thrill ride will make you feel like you're at the movies—only more so!
3. You've never played a game this cinematic. How cinematic is it? So cinematic that you'll cancel your Netflix subscription before the title screen finishes loading. It's *that* cinematic.
4. Invest in Triple Ape Studios. Fact: Video games are recession proof. Fact: Best investment you could ever hope to make. Act: Consider investing now. No need to consult your broker. Triple Ape.

➥ JASON KILLINGSWORTH IS *PASTE*'S GAMES EDITOR.

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